



電波女と

青春男4

人間人間
イラストやブリキでんばおんな せいしゅんおとこ
電波女と青春男④

電波女になる前の^{とうわ}藤和エリオは、それでも宇宙を追っかける少女だった。布団のかわりに、赤いランドセルを背負っていたんだってさ。

リュウシさんと前川^{まえかわ}さんは、俺に出会う前に、なんと淡い初恋を経験しちゃったりしてた。その結末は、ほろ苦い青春の味……だったりするのかな、やっぱり(すごく気になるけど訊けないし)。

そして俺は、エリオと同居しているにもかかわらず、意を決してエロ本購入大作戦を執行して!?

うー、俺たちの恥ずかしい過去を綴った短編集登場、らしい。



Novel Illustrations

い-9-14



電波女と青春男④

人間人間

電撃文庫
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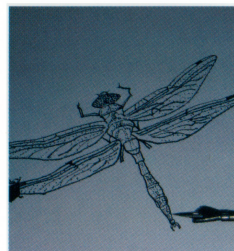
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©人間父

いるまひとま
人間人間

1986年生まれ。ライバル視しているのは同年代のダルビッシュ選手。手強すぎる。それと上の絵は画伯作です。4だっけ？

【電撃文庫作品】

嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん1～9、『i』
電波女と青春男①～④

イラスト:ブリキ

関西在住。最近、足腰が立たなくなりました。体を鍛えないと駄目ですね。

カバー／晩印刷

電波女と 青春男 4

人間人間
イラストやブリキ



designed by Yoshihiko Kamabe

御船流子 (ミネリユウ)

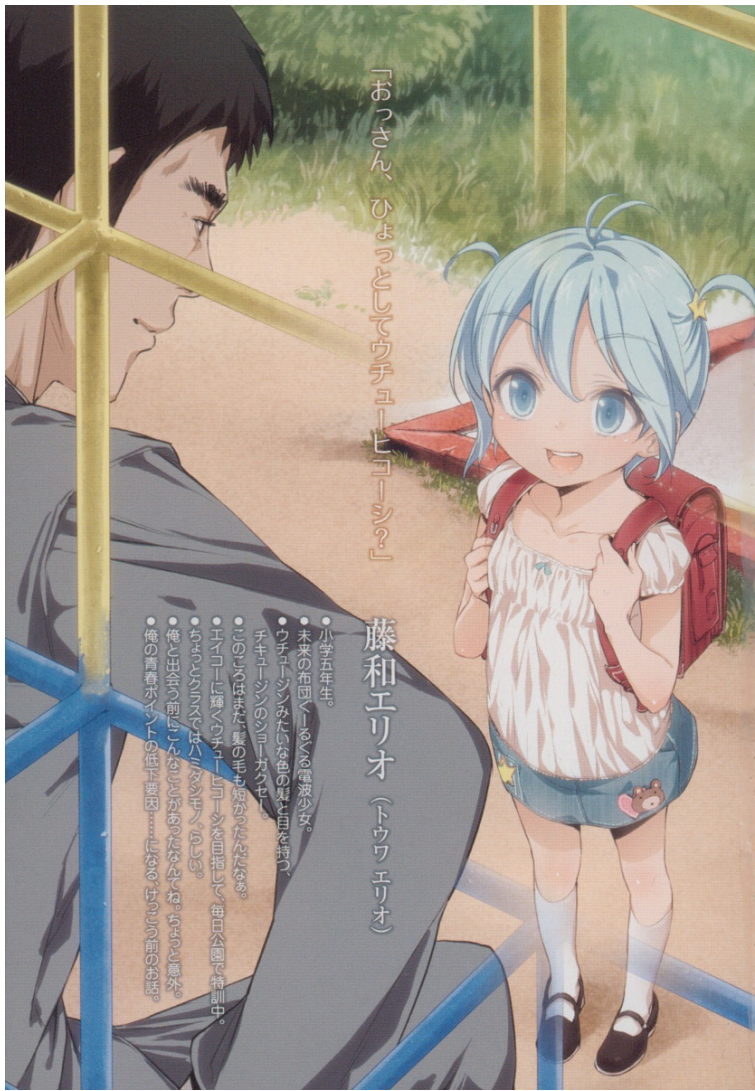
- 高校生。
- 性格は若干天然人た、普通の人。
- 二日前。髪の毛が真っ黒くさがるのをこまめにパーマをかけたらしい。
- 昨日。高3卒業式の日。御氏未婚にうれた……嬉しい。パーマかけたのに。
- そのシビックで、家出中。
- 俺と出会う前に、俺の存在を知らなかったなんてね。おめでとう。
- 俺の青春ボインの物語は……「さるうさぎ」前のお話。

「あたしはこれでも十……六ぐらいに見えますねってよく言われる十八歳なんですけど」



「おねーさんさあ、何時間ここにいたの？」

「いやいやきみでしょ」





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「にじゅうねんまえは～、
にじゅっさいだった～、ジャカジャン」

藤和女々 (トウワ メメ)

- 叔母。年齢は三十九歳……だったが、めでたく誕生日を迎えました。
- 真夏はノースリーブのシャツに短パン。歳を考えろ、と思わなくもない露出である。
- いつも笑って、深く考えているようで何も考えていない。
- ぜったい大人じゃないよな、この人……。

電波女と
青春男
4

Q:次の数式に当てはまる言葉を選びなさい。

「 」×「 」×「 」=「 」



- 「漫画喫茶でナンパされる」
- 「御船流子」
- 「失恋」
- 「家出中の女子高生」
- 「パーマのせいじゃない!」
- 「粒子が出る男の子」
- 「自称宇宙人」
- 「籠の中の靴」
- 「天体研究所」
- 「春休みの不思議体験」

『家出基地』

Q:次の数式に当てはまる言葉を選びなさい。

「 」×「 」×「 」=「 」
.....



- 「前川さん」
- 「幼馴染みの吉野」
- 「かぐや姫」
- 「願いの短冊」
- 「金髪に染めたこと」
- 「暴風雨の中、原チャリで疾走!」
- 「コスプレ継続」
- 「美容院のおねーさん」
- 「179.9cm」
- 「一夏の想いで」

『初恋を見下ろして』

Q: 次の数式に当てはまる言葉を選びなさい。

「 」×「 」×「 」=「 」



「藤和エリオ」
「おっさん」
「ウチューヒコーシ」
「チキュージンでショーガクセー」
「お母さんはすごい」
「カンキョーハカイシャ 柏木」
「公園で特訓!」
「はいはい、やだやだ」
「借り物競走がんばるぞー」
「等身大の自分」

『空への明日』

Q:次の数式に当てはまる言葉を選びなさい。

「 」×「 」×「 」=「 」



- 「丹羽真」
- 「星中小海」
- 「彼氏持ち」
- 「クリスマスの夜」
- 「青春ポイントってなに？」
- 「深夜の公園でコーヒー片手に」
- 「いきなり殴られる」
- 「受験生はつらい」
- 「図書館で二人きり」
- 「淡い初恋ってやつ？」

『ぼくと彼女の月の距離』

Q:次の数式に当てはまる言葉を選びなさい。

「 」×「 」×「 」=「 」



- 「丹羽真」
- 「突然エロに目覚める」
- 「本屋に一直線!」
- 「クラスの女子と鉢合わせ☆」

『E.R.O』

Chapter 1 - Runaway Hideout

Q: Select the appropriate words to fill in the blank

[] x [] x [] = []

[Getting hit on in a comic store]

[Mifune Ryuuko]

[A runaway highschool girl]

[It's not 'cuz I straightened my hair!]

[A boy who emits particles]

[Self-proclaimed alien]

[Shoes in a basket]

[Space Observatory]

[Mysterious Experience during Spring break]

Clank clank! I hafta try and make something in my heart match the wheels.
Bang bang bang, the onomatopoeia surrounded me!

Running away! Get Out To Home! Y'know what I mean!

I felt like I was passing in the centre of a highway while passing by the sidewalk. The wheels occasionally squeaked, as if they symbolized... I dunno? Love, hate and sadness. It's like eating a mouthful of sand after having shellfish.

In the town at dawn, devoid of even the bustling of trains, the only thing moving was me. It was darker than midnight, and some pubs and stores had their lights on still.

I thought I heard the sound of basketball bouncing on the gym floor; whatever sleepiness I had was blown away by the freezing air.

The third semester. Ending ceremony. March 25th. Yesterday.

I, Mifune Ryuuoko, was dumped by a guy not even my boyfriend. Sorry, that was a lie. I just wanted to make it sound dramatic.

He was almost just a classmate. We were equal, like a parallel line. Completely, horizon. Not even a hill!

Clank clank clank! The wheel of my mind spun as well. Ka-dung, Ka-dung (Train simulation). Sugars drained from my head from all the suppression — nay, repairing of emotions. It's a strange feeling of being disheartened and motivated. Glucose don't come flying, do they? Actually, why did I even run away from home?!

The cause of the future was in the past. Not that either of them were that far off!

Behind the school yard, I used my 'I like you beam!' on one of the boys in the basketball club! Pow pow! With the exact same sound, I emitted about thirty times the usual power! But that was my very first! Since high school started! And he said 'I'm sorry!'

A multiplying effect, primarily negative, was observed upon the deflection.

In other words not love, but self-loathing: the opposite of narcissism.

A deep pang ached in me. The bones of my feet seemed to collapsed without me knowing. I had no idea of how I got home on the day that's too far away from the warmth of spring, yet steeped by the tail of winter. By the time I realized, it was already around three of clock in the afternoon; I rolled around on my bed, troubled. Somehow I still had my helmet on, which hurt every time I flipped. The rhythmic pain was my revelation! Which resulted in me losing control.

Assume that I enter a university, in the sixth of the seven spring breaks. March 26th. Today. First day of being heartbroken.

I left a memo on the desk, shoved some clothes and change into my bag (almost brought my phone), and snuck out of the house a little before four o'clock.

Since it was my first ever runaway, my chest expanded rapidly from the beating heart! I didn't have the luxury of expecting something like that to happen; the words he rejected me with echoed in my head. Ring~ Ring~! Like knocking on a bell, it shook my ear drums endlessly.

Had I fallen asleep everything would have fell apart, so I held out until it was time to go. My face felt like it was someone who just returned from space: heavy. Since I've been riding against the wind, however, I should be able to make it to the place without falling asleep.

First, find a place to sleep. Right, and, um... Go on a journey to find myself?

Because the me here is useless! She belongs in a parade! I have to go find a different me! I have to find a fancier me! Because a person is her face! At least seventy or eighty percent anyway!

Skipping club on the first day of spring break — the journey began.

"There's no way I can go!!"

The guy who rejected me practises right next to us!

"The 25th will keep wrecking my head!"

Since no one would react to whatever I do, I did whatever I wanted.

I think I understand now just a little what goes through the head of the drunk men screaming and passing by my house.

First I entered the comic store in front of the station that I've designated as my abode; I went into the room with three hours on the clock.

I slept for about twelve hours — they took a lot of late fees for that.

The sun set on the first day of running away. Sitting on the dilapidated bench outside of the comic store, I watched the road, buildings and vending machine. Cars aside, I thought the other things were also avoiding me. Was I still dreaming?

The sun sunk; I couldn't tell if its path was the same as the orange sky, and my motivation burnt away as well. The right leg that cramped while I was riding didn't hurt as long as I kept moving. Since I fell asleep, however, my overworked brain tensed up. Especially the right hemisphere, it probably looked like Italy.

The left brain would be Shikoku.

I yelled, like 'Geebee~' But I think it came out like a weird moan 'Bogehh~' I was able to transform into a strange being using the girl-power I've saved up. In a way, I got a lot of that stuff from yesterday.

The town I live in ranks about sixty in the urban-ness scale. There's no need to ride a train to buy grocery like the country side, but it's still a little different than your typical city.

People often report seeing aliens here. It's like the Rosswell of Japan. And it's not just UFO — people emphasise that they saw real, breathing aliens.

And so the souvenir stores often sell wormhole honey cakes, space pancakes *etc.* I would totally buy a cute Grey doll though.

After I followed the high school couples riding doubt on bicycle with my eyes, I returned to the comic store. Just like before, the blonde attendant chatted on with the other clerks. After paying about five times the usual fee for being late, I again order three more hours. At this point, about thirty percent of my tiny allowance was devoured by this register in front of me.

Getting my hair done two days ago pretty much killed my wallet. I went and curled it up as preparation for the confession. I feel more murdered now after that.

Hunger, thirst, depression and other similarly terrible things appeared, so I decided to take care of things as soon as possible. Before entering the room, I bought a cup Ramen at the vending machine and added the complementary hot water. Since the store doesn't sell vegetables, I had to make due with noodles. After filling the paper cup with Oolong tea, I entered booth 14.

A Television, a computer and a video game console. There was no shortage of equipment there. I did not turn on anything, however, instead setting my bag down onto the floor.

Head on my knees, I awaited for the three minutes of cooking.

"....."

It's kinda like watching the candle on a birthday cake like I used to do.

Staring at the cover of the noodles, I felt my sight blur.

My bubbling organs felt slow, and my pain dulled.

So now's a good time to ask: Why did I runaway?

I could try to ignore him, but I know that won't work. It's just his head, and that awkward grin. That's the face he had when he rejected me.

There's no way I could just be, like, 'Heya!' and go into the club gleefully.

I didn't want to mope in a room or try to get ride of the gloominess. I want to feel easier: I want to be more positive. That much I know at least.

So for that purpose, what should I do before heading back? Mm~ I didn't think that far ahead, so dunno. 'Not thinking far ahead' simply meant, 'I didn't think at all, but here's what I have.'

I'm so dumb.

Despite leaving home, I didn't go anywhere unfamiliar on a train or anything. I stayed in this town I know, because I'm scared. I don't leave town often.

I don't have money to live in a hotel, and camping is... Well, it's asking too much for a city kid.

Mm... Doesn't this feel more like going out, rather than running away?

Gulp, gulp... The thought disappeared with the tea.

Putting the paper cup onto the desk, I stared at the me inside of that grey screen.

Her gaze wasn't warm, like the emotion was still with the yet-ended winter air.

I looked for things to do. Since I was in a comic store, I spaced out reading some manga.

I'm a rather normal person, without any remarkable characteristics. I even failed on making he notice me, and my brain only has two halves... Ugh, self-harming fouled against esteem five times, so she's out of the game.

All in all I just couldn't stay away from the words 'comic store.' I just sat here, reading manga, all while mixing a whole buncha drinks.

If something interesting, like, totally captures my eyes, then I'll feel slightly better for myself, like I'm the one who did it. Sadly, Ryuuko is not that good at practical problems. I rolled up on the chair. Squirm~ I look just like a panel in my comic.

As I finished the fifth book in a row, I decided to return them. It was eleven o'clock outside now, and the road outside of the window shone with lights of the passing cars. Mm... It's a station known for accidents. It's not too far from where I live... Well, it is basically where I live.

An officer probably won't need twenty minutes to find me. And there would go the game of hide and seek. My parents are pretty lenient though, or maybe they just don't care... My head filled with selfish thoughts.

Walking in the hall, I passed by other customers and the attendant lazily mopping the floor. Even this late in the night, many kinds of people were in.

For example, the couples who couldn't be older than high schoolers, and the such... And the such... Okay, I feel empty inside, so that's all I will say. Actually, pretty sure that the store said that minors couldn't be in here after ten o'clock.

I'm a sixteen years old young'n too. Wow, how flexible. Someone used that as a catch phrase before. It was an expression of shock, but I forget his name or even the meaning of the words. Oh well, two years before the exams anyway.

I walked through the magazines, drinks and vending machines and arrived at the young adult section.

It was then I saw a striking (eye-catching?) person at the section of the books I just marathoned through. "Whoa..." I subtly exhaled before sucking the breath back in.

A striking boy with long, long hair that seemed to have fragments of light falling from it stood.

From the slits between his bangs he looked up the shelf, seemingly searching with an open hand for the place the books he held in his hand. He stepped on his shoes, without socks on.

He was a super hot guy. Like, literally the most beautiful person on planet earth, made by the aliens.

Not sayin' I have proofs or anything, but fairies seemed to live on his head to give him this dramatic glow. Also, some sort of the prettiest butterflies must inhabit the same place too, so he wouldn't need a light in the dark.

If it were before I got dumped, I would have fell hard for him. That's how hot he was.

He's probably a little younger than I. About half a head taller than I was, he emanated from his brows or cheeks a youthful aura. Ah... That must be the youth I've lost... A middle schooler? But isn't that bad for him to be out here instead of home? I was both at a lost and in disbelief. It is surprising, compare to me when I was at the age.. Ah... That must be the youth I've lost... A middle schooler? But isn't that bad for him to be out here instead of home? I was both at a lost and in disbelief. It is surprising, compare to me when I was at the age.

Since my spot was near the boy, I went up to him. With a glance, he noticed my intention and moved to the side. His sight, however, did not move, and instead followed my hand.



'About half a head taller than I was, he emanated from his brows or cheeks a youthful aura.'

"Ah, that's the volumes I'm looking for. Onee-san, you're reading it? Are you putting them back?"

He spoke in a clingy way. Must be because he's still developing, his voice's pitch changed when he speaks. Sounded synthetic. He leaned forward, face closing onto my hand. Usually I don't say anything to strangers passing by, so this put me off.

"Ah... Yeah. Here ya.. go."

I stiffly handed the books stacked on my hands to him. The boy thanked me lightly and traded the comic on his hand with me. I took it.

I know I said we traded, but I wonder why he put the book back into my hand instead of the shelf.

"See ya~" The handsome boy waved and walked off with laughable footsteps. I swear there were still lights lingering from where he stood.

Once I breathed deeply again, the sheen slipped away from between the pages of the book.

"Why?" Why did he hand the book to me? I came for the next volumes, so why would I take the previous ones?

Ah, a lady passing by (an OL, I think. An older woman with professional attire) just turned her head. That's pretty much glaring at this point. The guy, on the other hand, didn't even bat an eye and continued on until he disappeared at the corner. Mm... Guess my standard of beauty is just normal.

Grade, normal. Mien, normal. Look, b-better than average, I think! Basically I am just normal.

What is normal? The question boggles me, but if I had to ask myself, I'll probably just stop working with my head tilted.

I never had the chance to stand out. The person I confessed is at most 'some guy I talk to occasionally,' and our relationship can pretty much be summarized by a bunch of random words. So I couldn't whine or anything, only get

depressed.

I want to have something. I want to be treated differently. It's a childish thought, but it's almost what I really want.

To me, a good-looking guy like him will actually incur my jealousy across the gender! Dangit! I'm clutching my pearls! I want to curse at someone!

Then I went back ('cuz I'm a Ryuushi 粒子) to my room to read my book.

It's a pretty funny series, but since I didn't use my head, the flower known as my purpose withered.

I kept reading till the next day; as I went to take a shower, I bumped into that boy again.

Again, in front of that shelf, he stood there with his shoes on.

It's not like I was trying to avoid this so-called conversation with him, but I still couldn't ignore him completely. I am actually quite the stoic person. Seriously: I'm so hardcore that I prefer harder rice too.

“Hey? We meet again.”

Like a hardcore person, he turned abruptly; he initiated the conversation after coming up to me. He had one more book, so I ended up here first.

Why did he speak to me? If he's the type of guy who likes to cling onto girls with his voice and words, than he'd probably hit on the OL lady (temporary name) too, right? She was clearly entranced by him.

Maybe I attract aliens like this guy. Yet my destiny will never notice me.

I know another person who can produce light and can sharpened the lens of people's eyeballs. She was my classmate; a girl who was a friend until a time I don't remember. She's now a mattress expert.

In a way she was untouchable. Nothing could make it into that futon.

“Could you recommend me anything else?”

His kind tone was as if we were friends for many years, so I pretended to wonder, 'Well...' to scout him out. Every time his neck turned, his bangs would follow; the particles of light would fall like harvest.

Mm...

First time meeting → Never met him before → He talked to me → Ah!

Conclusion.

Is this... the rumoured... H-hitting on girls?

Ya are late by a day... Ah, two days. Cough, cough. I felt my once-in-the-life chance's late arrival!

Too slow! Ya are way too slow! Can't ya learn a thing or two from Santa?

“Um? You don't have anything?”

“I-I do! One just popped out!”

“What? Just popped out?”

Thanks to reality and my thoughts combining, I confused the situation even more.

“No way. That's not the name, is it?” He kept the smile, but the blinking increased.

“Don't mind me. Uh, um... The, uh, comic...” What do you want?

My cheeks burnt from reasons other than being tempted, and I wondered. It's our first time meeting, so it's hard to ask these first-time questions. I couldn't shoot him a mean glance, asking him 'what dya want?' I'm a weak person like that.

In some way, this boy was a resident of a different world.

I wasn't drawn to 'special' people like him, since I am aware of how normal I am. If some were to say that, I'd rebuke right away. People get upset when the truth is pointed out. Back to what I was saying. How do I put it? It's a matter of compatibility.

Even if a black white television suddenly get a patch of colour, it's still considered broken.

It's a little rude to the person who might like me, but I like people who are more normal.

His lashes are very long. Every time he blinks it's like they'd fall into his eyes and tear him up.

“Right, I was gonna ask you about something...”

Like an easy-to-chew mochi, his manner was opposite to mine.

“Mm?” It's gonna be hard to leave now that he's so nice to me.

“Onee-san, how long have you been here?”

The boy suddenly tried to invade into my mind with words.

My focus blurred, but I still looked up to him.

From the side, his slightly curved upper lip made him seem somewhat inhuman.

“Don't look so spooked, it's too obvious.”

“.....” He went from hitting on me to a creepy stalker.

Things have been cut short to my height! Jk.

“Well, as you can see I have a little more height here. I could see a little inside the booths. You've been sleeping since this morning, haven't you, Onee-san?”

The transition into a smile fit this guy. It's a relaxing smile that squints the eyes into lines. The moment I saw his face made me wonder if he was wearing a fox mask.

“Ya are a bad boy for peeking into a lady's room.”

I teased him first. I was going to scream 'pervert!!' at five times the volume, but thinking about it calmly, there's nothing funny about that.

“If I wasn't peeking, can I just look?”

If he could see into the room from above, that means it's not just him, but many others saw me sleeping too. Gah... Now that's embarrassing...

“You came here to sleep in the morning; you didn't go home last night either, so what are you up to? This isn't somewhere a minor can be in late.”

“Same goes for ya, right?”

“Hm?”

“If ya saw me in the morning, that means ya were also here in the morning.”

Using the same evidence, I turned the table all while putting the comic back.

The boy went 'Ah!' while scratching his chin. His skin was very pale, and clear.

“Yep, that's right. I see.”

He looked not at me, but the spines of the book listed on the shelf, and lightly retracted his chin. Mm... So he's in the same boat as I? A.k.a another runaway boy. He was rejected too... I'm just being bitter.

Also, 'he looks young, but is in fact twenty years old' theory has disappeared. Let it go.

“Onee-san, you're not... running away from home, are you?”

He got me first. I wanted to ask, 'you too, eh?' but I ended up looking at him silently. This guy's grin could affect any who looked his way.

“You look a little young to be a jobless refugee. Rather... Are you even an Onee-san?”

Between the first and the last part of his line, he clearly had on a different expression.

It's like it was courtesy words at the beginning, then pure doubt near the end. What was he projecting onto?

How did this kid, with his eyes covered by his hair, end up thinking this way?

“I'm a... sixteen year old-looking eighteen years old.”

There are ears behind the wall, and attendants by the register. Adult's world is filled with lies.

The boy chuckled; 'I see,' he whispered.

“Didn't think you're the same as I. I'm eighteen too, but I can probably get a middle school discount at a theater with this look.” He opened his hands to express his age.

“My, we're both young, aren't we? I thought you looked young... Must be my maternal instinct!”

“Right? Guess I will be calling you Onee-san.”

Hahaha, we're already buddies just by appearance.

“What about you?” It was time to do the questioning.

“What do you mean?” Still laughing, he did not resist.

“Runaway boy. Whatever you used on me, I can use on you.”

Due to my marathoning of the comics about people who's mind and body were not in sync, I obtained traits of a detective. I will steal the mushrooms growing behind the people.

Since until just now, I had been lying down on the chair; I grew tire just standing. I felt stiff from head to toe; lying down was my only respite. I've successfully degenerated.

I was supposed to grow from leaving my home though.

“Me? I'm actually just an alien. Came from the Hair Constellation.”

He introduced himself with a joking and lighthearted manner. I knew it was meant to make his opponent drop interest, or to laugh it off. For me, however, this reminded me of something. I am, after all, someone who goes to a certain high school here.

“Mmmm~”

“What? Why the silence? Was it that lame?” His smile disappeared. The boy looked away with a slightly sombre look.

“Nah. I was just thinking that maybe a perfect person just has an obligation to call himself an alien.”

“Wha~?”

He shrugged and scratched the back of his head. He looked good doing anything. If he were to fall asleep and wake up in class with a dumbstruck look, nobody would hate him.

“Oh yeah. Did you leave home just to read comics, Onee-san?”

He went on despite me never confirming his accusation. “Well? Well?” He so exhorted me, staring me on the tip of the nose.

I felt my skin heating up from also the heater.

“Mm~ If that could get me there, can you blame me?”

My goal is to find a way to go from painting my room 'Blue~ Blue' to 'Happy~ Happy~' Reflect the vector. The arrow's age of rebellion. If it's an antimatter that could help me get there, I don't care what it is or what it does.

For example, this guy right here. So far, he managed to remind me of that friend, but nothing positive.

“You're stuttering. So you've not done what you set out to do?”

“Wouldn't I be home if I did?”

“That's true, but I only left so I can go home.”

He said such an incomprehensible and easily-misunderstood thing.

“Onee-san, are you bored?”

“Mm~ Well... I guess.” It doesn't carry much weight when you ran away from home home.

It's spring break, and I couldn't go enjoy my youth in the club (I forgot about this), so even if I was home I'd probably just laze like a worm.

The boy grinned as though he'd heard something interesting — a mischievous smile. He really only knows how to smile, the darn happy face. Was I envious or jealous? Probably both.

“Ah... How about this? It's getting hot in here, so why don't we...”

He bent down and match his eyes with mine.

It's like he's dealing with a kid... His soft smile appeared before I could think even that.

Looking closely at his face, I thought again, 'Gee, the world isn't fair.'

Lights danced by my skin, spreading like fireworks in the sky.

For a moment I thought I was a heroine in a shoujo manga.

“...Sneak into the place closest to the stars in this town?”

“Wha?”

This city plus alien way of picking up girls is way too avant-garde for me.

I left the comic rental with the boy.

Five hours of the special eight-hour deal was wasted by us walking in the dark.

I asked where we were going later, and though I thought that maybe it's dangerous if he was a bad person trying to bring me somewhere no one is... After some consideration, I figured I just got rejected two days ago and nobody would pay me any heed, and thus lowered my guard for my own needs.

Another mysterious impetus was the boy's strange mien. He's not like me, and I thought he was someone on a mission. Hazily I wished to be the sidekick of another special being. As for the main character... I gave up after a little thought.

This guy's intention intrigued me... I was a little excited.

It reminded me of childhood.

I circled to the side of the store. The theatre next door that had just closed down already lost all lights of people and lives; the vending machine shone as the only lumination to the road.

Placed there was a bicycle lot used by few. Next to the building within was what seemed to be an abandoned bicycle. The paint, as well as the basket in front, fell off long ago.

“Oh... You ride a bicycle, Onee-san?”

“Yeah, comes in handy.”

I rode the same bike that was gifted to me in celebration to graduating into middle school. The inspection sticker given during that time was still stuck on the back wheel.

The bike was unlocked and prepared. Mm... Really not trying to hide my trace or anything, having a bike with my name on it parked outside.

Yet the guy just stood there, shaking as though regretting his thin clothes.

“Mm... Where's your bike?” Is that a place we can walk to? We're not changing destination, are we?

“I walk... Well, I just don't have a bike. Walking, huh... Guess we can ride together.”

An undisguised look of anticipation. To prevent the possible sparks between our eyes, I looked to the sides. To see if there were officers out patrolling.

“Then are we riding double? I only have a helmet for myself. It's really scary, y'know.”

I reminded him like I was his senior and put on and adjusted the helmet.

Oh, right... I'm a second year now, so I'll have juniors in the club now.

“What's so scary? Do people in blue shoot you if you don't wear helmet in this town?”

“No, it's so that if a boar runs into ya, your scalps will not be destroyed.”

“I see. So just don't fall.”

He dismissed the notion with a pained expression before straddling onto the luggage rack.

Mm... Such reckless bravery is youth. Wait, am I pedalling?

As I imagined, he hugged my waist as soon as I sat on the seat. From the tip of my toes I felt all sense of calm leaving, like a hamster wheel inside of me had begin spinning.

Ah, my heart accelerated on its own. Don't waste my life! I couldn't take a shower earlier, does he not mind the smell or whatever? Plus having physical contact with a guy is already rare for me. Feels like a dream, riding a bike together.

But since holding onto my shoulder meant skin-to-skin contact, so it actually made me a little more relaxed, then I thought, oh well, this is okay.

“Whoa! You're thin! Are you eating enough?”

The end of his sentence rose in pitch like a mom's; he's skin and bone too, so I wondered if his mom said the same thing. I didn't say it though since I didn't want to hear about another alien.

“Onee-san, why did you run away from home? You're not one of those 'self-

searching' people, right? Don't tell me you had an argument with your parents."

"Reason?" I inadvertently shut my eyes from the sudden darkness.

Swish~ Darkness entered the depth of my head; I exhaled deeply.

'Cuz I was dumped. I was cut in half. That's why I said I was on a journey of life. I'm not even brave enough to do a double-dribble. But how does this fit into the equation? Well...

"Scar."

"Hm?"

"A scar like a knife wound doesn't recover well if it's cut in the same place a lot, right?"

"Hmm? Is this a metaphor?"

"Heheh, that's how it is if ya wanna be smart." I put up a smug expression to brag to the boy who thought we were the same age.

"It does sound elegant if you put it so jadedly. Hmm. Did someone hurt you?"

"Most people who leave home have been."

"Do you hate someone now?"

"I don't. Because I don't want to make others hate me too."

It is true that I left because I was hurt.

Because I thought about him in the room, and even put his name down on the note when we're studying.

"We'll leave this for later. Let's go, Onee-san. I have this funny feeling that an alien of high status had told others to start navigating."

He'd fit right in in this town, but we already have a futon person here... Therefore he needs the tin foil. Roasted, too. I'm drooling... Since I'd been awake I am hungry now. My stomach might growl if I kept still, so I frantically began moving forward; the sound of wind grew beside the ears.

Headwind blew beneath the earlobes like waves.

My breath, though, exited intermittently and shallowly.

What was my goal? What was I after? The silhouette blurred. I didn't even have a real reason to hang around this guy: at most I just went along with him. It's unclear if it's something I should feel proud about.

But I won't deny that I followed him because this handsome guy hit on me.

Mm~ that's still not all of it. I cannot rebuke one-hundred percent.

Maybe I'm just a girl who wanted someone to spoil me? I hope not.

I don't want just anybody... Well, until yesterday.

Was it anticipation, mindfulness, laziness, or hopefulness?

Which was the primary motivation to keep me from stopping?

In the dark, I searched for the cause while pedalling.

The well-kept light that drove the darkness away elated me.

When I was a child much more naive than I am now, there was much around that was as terrifying as they were fascinating.

There was that empty lot behind the super market. Even if nothing was there, for some reason it's always been scary. I saw a wild cat living there years later.

There's also the underground stair case behind my elementary school. It led to a room that we're not suppose to go in. Putting your ear onto the door revealed whirling of machines behind.

The world has many places my hands and knowledge cannot yet reach. I thoughts every grown-ups knew about that, and believe that there are many more out in the world.

And because I wanted to learn more, I gathered the kids around to discover and investigate the town. There are a lot of strange facilities around here, so everywhere had something that both intrigued and scared us. I guess it's probably because of that one strange old lady in a shop who lies to the kids with a straight face.

Us kids used this so-called snack store as our secret hideout. The adults didn't like that too much because the store openly displayed the taxidermy of a tsuchinoko and a signature of an alien.^[1]

The most mysterious had to be the observatory though. Some kids called it the bathroom, but observatory sounded more exciting with the 'beep beep' (sfx) and 'boop boop' (electronic sounds), so most kids called it that.

It had a huge plot of land and several concrete buildings; like a JSDF base, even the wall carried a heavy aura. I recalled us mistaking the place as a rocket launch site and getting all excited for it.

Placed in the courtyard-like location was a giant telescope most popular as a school trip destination, free for anyone to visit. I've seen it several times before. I thought that the universe itself existed in the scope, since that's where the stars can be seen clearly. Still, the kids weren't interested in the scope, but the places forbidden to trespass.

Everyone spoke of the existence of aliens in the facilities. Or that it was the alien's hideout, mmm...and that people were brought there to be experimented on. There was also a T.V. special of alien dissection video tape and such; we were probably more terrified because of all that.

I personally think the staffs' lab coats are frightening: It must be from the memories I had from dentists, or doctors giving me a shot. I still hold a bias against people in scrubs and glasses, wary that they're secretly doing some experiments or making new drugs. Back to what I was saying. I don't really know what I was saying, but as I was saying!

“Whoa! W-why did you go hands-free?! This isn't safe when you have a passenger!”

“Hey! Hah! Heya! Hoh!” Please imagine my zigzag line with just the line itself.

“Why are you raising your arms? Ventura?”^[2]

“Pay no mind!” With a calm voice like a video game notification, I said.

Cough... So, in other words... The place we were headed was the space observatory.

The boy said he was going to 'discover a way back.' He sounded just like that old lady from the snack shop; laughter escaped my lips when I heard that.

'Cuz... A boy who was younger than I am is desperately trying to pick me up...

It sounds cute when I put it that way, but that's not what it was: It had a strange mien, but also a little serious. I wanted to know the kind of person he was, so I followed behind.

We began infiltrating that impenetrable place.

Mm... I wanted to play ninja while eating chikuwa. The old team was three guys and three girls. People used to laugh when boys and girls played together; it's a common sight, but fortunately our group was, in a good way, separated from everyone else in our little space. In the end we went our own ways after an awkward fight.^[3]

Uwah~ I got lotsa bad memories with people. We almost ran straight into the road. "Gah!" I'll leave it up to you to imagine whose scream that was, but we almost got hit by a scooter. Maybe I'll just give up on thinking, wouldn't wanna be on the news.

But, just one last thing.

Our group wanted to sneak into the staff's building; it was all yes for the three boys, and no for the girls. The girls thought their parents would get mad at them so they didn't want to go. I didn't think my parents would get that angry, but I was afraid of the researchers capturing and doing operations to make me into Ryuushi V2.

Truth is I really wanted to play ninja, so now's the perfect time for me to realise my childhood dream!

Since my parents are going to yell at me for running off anyway, might as well do a lil sumthing before the sun comes up. Let's go, to make up for the two traumas by sneaking in!

It's only about twenty minutes on bike from where I live, and the traffic so little we could ignore the lights. We successfully arrived. This must be what a leaf in a river feels like. Six bicycles came by here everyday during my childhood to scout this familiar road; perhaps because it was the first time done in the dark, nostalgia did not wake. It was practically a different road.

But the destination remained unchanged.

"Whoa..." I'd agree with that if I came here before the night.

Faint light diffused from the building's windows; the telescope watched the sky motionlessly. The trees hid its shape, and the atmosphere dead silent. The smell disjointed from the living seemed to drift over in line with uncanny experiments.

What an unsettling smell. The territory of science, yet formless and eerie.

An old excitement rose, possibly wiping off a little of the melancholy.

First I parked the bike near the farm field just a road away from the wall of the research facility. 'Here we are~' I said while wiping my forehead. In truth, due to the chill brought in by the winter, even the people who live here could feel this cold that froze even the season spring. Plus it's not like it's far enough to get me sweating.

I took out my jacket and wore it. The boy wore his own over a mere shirt, but his face showed no sign of discomfort; he's obviously okay.

Guess being cold isn't a problem in space anyway. Gotta hand it to the so-called alien.

"Aight, let's go." I held the key to my bike lock in my mouth. What if I swallow it?

"Hey, aren't you going to take off that useless helmet?"

"I don't feel safe empty-handed."

Actually my hair just gets messy after I take off the helmet.

"What is that, some kind of setting? Alien and ninja do sound good together though."

"Ya are not supposed to say that..." That signalled the end of the character-change.

I'd changed in ten years of time; I'd lost my compatriots, and only my sense of shame grew.

Around the facility was — rare even for this town — farm fields. Not many lived near, reinforcing further the sense of isolation and mysticism. There's no convenient store around either, so the guys inside probably don't like that too much.

“Could there really be alien fossils or mummies?”

“Onee-san, there's one right here. You're really hyped though.”

“Mm? You...? Ya have pupils, and ya aren't glowing either so ya don't count.”

“I'm not some cat alien. Frankly your expectation is a little too much.”

He said so lightheartedly while walking along the building's wall. After about a quarter of the parameter, he shifted from chatting to questioning.

“You look like you know your way around. Don't tell me: You come here all the time?”

“Hmhmhm. It's like a backyard for people who grew up here.” I crossed my arms proudly.

But this might be a Tsuchinoko territory. So it's more like a backyard that's not well-maintained.

“I see. You wouldn't know the people inside, would you?” He scratched his cheek while asking.

“Well, maybe not that far. But we once had this guy come up to us all gleefully. We ran away 'cuz we thought he was lying and was gonna kidnap us!”

The only one who thought it was truly dangerous was me, but we all bolted. It's the only way to make our bodies, or rather, things move forward. It's actually pretty boring just staring; we even got so tired we ended up playing dodge ball in the field.

That must be why the boys wanted to open that forbidden door.

“Oh yeah. This isn't a midnight stroll, right? Ya got business here?”

This door should be shut closed during this time, and only staffs can enter. There were also security at what seemed like the backdoor; they're the reason why us kids thought the place was suspicious.

“Yeah, I do.”

He answered cheerfully with a crisp smile. I almost thought the frigid air was going to freeze his lips there — it was that cold.

And I was still starving, so that might have made it colder. I also lost my

handwarmer. After another quarter circle, we stopped at the exact opposite place to where the bicycle was parked; the boy then said, 'it's around here' and started feeling the wall. Like a salamander he fiddled the vertical part. I wanted to interrupt him by hitting the wall, but in the end I decided to wait quietly.

I don't wanna be too normal, but normal is what I do. Normal people don't trespass though... Not that it's something to be proud of.

“Here, found it.” He pulled away a part of the wall and revealed a passage. Looks like he merely removed the cover disguising the broken part of the parameter.

The boy looked back smugly, 'the way's opened.'

“Did ya do this beforehand?”

“Nope, it was the staffs inside. The front door's too far away so they made this shortcut. Heard it was convenient when you're running late.”

“Really? Ya know quite a bit. Do you work here?”

“I can't just ignore the Japanese branch office of the Alien's planetary invasion.”

He spoke in a way matching my own to hide his identity as well as his involvement. “Let's go.”

The boy crawled into the hole first. Once inside, I'd be totally trespassing. Mm, I'd be able to go ahead if I still was an impulsive youth, but I came here with this sense of listlessness. I sometimes find myself unaware of my feet's movement, especially during repetition exercise, when we're training. It's kinda like that now, right? My body clearly wasn't listening.

“Mm? What's up? Gonna give up?”

The boy who was about to enter paused looking back with his right leg raised. It's kinda like that lil white guy on the emergency exit sign (that's what I called the man made of a circle and rectangles).

“It's more like there's a few things that I'm worried about.”

“I hope you figure out soon, because someone might come.”

He looked around several times and hurried me. I know, but I wanna get things cleared up so I don't feel unmotivated. That's what life taught me.

“Why me? And don't ya joke about how ya fell in love at first sight.”

I drew the line first. At least that way he'd forget about thinking me as a hopeless girl who was expecting something to happen. I hope. I'm not the same person I was yesterday, but mostly in a bad way.

“Hm? Because I think it's a good opportunity.”

He took another big step to keep his balance.

“Isn't it boring to have a home to go back to when you're running away? With a backup and all, even if you don't an income, you'd live for a few days. That's why I thought you'd come with me.”

“.....” He pointed out how immature the way I do things is.

He might have jabbed where it hurt, but it's just a vibration to my numbed heart.

And he's probably just brushing me off.

“Ok, I'll set that aside for now, but is there no other reason why you wanted me here?”

“Hm? That's because I'm scared of going in alone.”

His voice was calm, but since it was dark, neither of us could see each others' face. Thankfully no one saw us; he sighed.

“I'm serious. I'm a sad alien who can't do anything on my own.”

I thought about recommending him learning super powers like an E.T. then come back.

“Who knows what they'd do to me in the underground lab if they caught me here.”

“Right... Ya are an alien.” Hahah... I laughed weakly. It's different than tiredly.

“Wait, you believe me now?” He raised his leg further up like he was about to do a backflip.

“I'm one of those who believe aliens 'can exist,' so I don't think much of it. It's whatever, really, but can I ask another question?”

“Sure. Make it quick though, if you can.”

“Why are you really here for?”

“Onee-san, why did you come with me?”

It's like having a mail that hasn't been read sent straight back to you. That's pretty annoying. There wasn't strength left in my tummy to rebuke this guy though. The empty stomach protested something else.

“I'm, uh... Whacha call it? I'd probably be happy just seeing the inside.”

Not sure if I will wake up from the dream or be glad from achieving my goal. But if possible, I want to at least be happy for a bit.

But I was both out of breath and without a recipient. Uwah, do I actually want someone to be with? My reason of being sad hasn't change since long ago. Back then too... If the boys and girls who liked each others were evenly split up, we might have been better friends.

“Sigh, for realsies...” I palmed my face, sneaking a glance at the past between my fingers.

If it's hard for me to forget, I will jump over it.

Just make something up when there's nothing; just pretend the opportunity is already upon me.

Bet everything here.

It's a little dramatic, but this will be the start of everything.

Just for a moment, I returned to being the six year old Mifune Ryuuko.

'If you don't wanna be scolded, just don't get caught!'

Yep, that's what boy B said at that time. Great thinking, but that's isn't the reason why I liked him!

And so I crossed the wall and trespassed.

The guy can finally rest his right leg.

Then I snapped. I mean, gave up. This was my decision: I ripped the strings of rejection from my back and sprinted like a 100 meter dasher. Step, step... I started doing time mark for some reason. A pleasant rustle came beneath from the grass. This might have been the sound of footstep that I've not noticed outside of a gym in a long, long time.

“Not sure if you're just pent up or something.”

“All right!” Ignoring the boy I smacked my cheeks. Didn't like that sound, so here's another. Smack! Smack! Sounded off, so one more! Not this time because my skin's foundation didn't feel too good! I can dreams too! Smack!

“Awww~” Hurts. Sleepiness and laziness both died like the thing you slap with a slipper. The edge of my eyes flashed and hurt; eye lashes felt like hedgehogs.

“Um... Onee-san, you trying to wake up? Or just hurting yourself?”

He pulled up; the building shimmered, emanating his silhouette.

“What? I'm just trynna get rid of my Shoujo points from my head. You might turn into girl if ya stay too close.”

With a daring expression, I suavely (No idea what that means) warned him. Crossing the wall itself is pretty much half of what I came for, and the rest is all bonus.

So I don't care what else happens.

“And what would happen if I am?”

“Yer eyes get oogly.” Or something like that. “Or you get puffy eyelashes” and such. “You shoot particles out.” Kinda like salmon eggs.

All those apply for me already... Dangit... A naive girl and self-appointed runaway alien boy. This is not one of those word fillers you see in a school essay.

“Why the stare?”

“Ding ding ding~ I'm rebellious like that?”

“.....”

He's giving me the 'wow if she's normal, she's just an idiot' look. I also

couldn't call him a pervert, not with that cold stare he's giving me.

But he still resumed the conversation with me.

“I was a little worried why you're suddenly so giddy, but now you got my attention too. Onee-san, you've got a lovely smile.”

Hehe~ Wink~ This is known as crab (heart going sideways).

“Mm...”

“What? Trying to hide with a growl?”

“Don't gimme that good looking face just 'cuz ya are good lookin'!”

“S-sorry?” The boy backed off.

“I'm like a black-n-white television! I don't needa learn to hide my presence! Hahaha!” And so I charged into the building close by. This was where the door with the warning was; we'd seen it so many times that I am confident I could make it with my eyes closed.

The boy trailed along and came to my side with a wry grin.

“Onee-san, you too must have a lot of... Well, wonders around you.”

“Wu... Wu... Wu...”

“Like making crabs fall for you.”

“You tellin' me to go back to the sea?”

“The river is fine too.”

Splash! I sunk. Sunk into the depth of heart; sunk into the abyss. My grief rippled outward.

“Right, infiltration successful thus far.”

“Oh, she's back.”

“Keep eyes on not just around ya, but also above ya.”

“You don't have to be so 3D about it, do you? What are we looking out for?”

“It's a space facility, so if a rock or laser beam came I got my helmet to protect me! It's ta make sure my scalp is safe!”

“Onee-san, your space's got scale but not much power.”

“Peace is the best.” Whether it be Earth or mind. My wallet is staying skinny for the next two months though.

The boy and I stepped through the grass and pebbles, approaching the grey, iron door with 'No Trespassing' written on. A mysterious machine surrounded by a metallic fence hummed on the side. What appeared to be tubings connected into the interior of the building tastefully.

Just like the outside brother of my house's AC — every adult's delusion is to use their myopic understanding when faced with facts.

“Wow! This is intense! To be honest... This door was my first love.”

“I see.”

“Uh, could ya not rain on my parade? Ya are supposed to react to my joke. It's already so cold, ya dig?”

It's not like I was wrong or anything, so this lack of reaction embarrassed me so much.

In a broader sense, the word 'Trespassing' was what moved me.

But this guy wasn't even hyped for anything — he even seemed tired. His eyes were fidgeting though.

“What's up? Wanna bit of my hype?”

“It's fine, I'm just a little nervous. I'll try to be like you... Actually no, I like my own brain.”

“I see. We will become balance-partners then! Let's go!”

I finally felt the right to hold this door knob, so I squeezed. “Gawah!” The static trap activated. Felt like getting cut by a nail clipper beneath your nail.

Darn this dry air... I cupped my mouth and checked if there was movements around. Mm, don't think so.

Once again, with breath held, I turned the knob.

A terrible sound of metallic parts grinding against one another emitted from the door; it opened like the door to the library.

I pushed with my shoulder and plastered my back to the wall. Fuu... Fuu... I carefully masked my breathing, and warned the boy who came in normally.

“Careful: there must be infrared scanner on the wall.” Whisper... Whisper...

Please pretend our conversation was carried out telepathically.

“Infra...red?”

“Mm... What cha call it? It's, um... A lotta colours put together and ya can see people.”

“Right, you can see temperature with that.”

“Right. What are ya talking about?”

“Um...” We pondered. Thinking and thinking... The Heisei board of education has failed.^[4]

After the atmosphere of spreading your arms out and surrounded by wind on an open field had passed, the air assumed it's gloomy and unnoticeable stance again. The hall, supported by thin lights, allowed me to see its entirety.

A hallway silent, yet solidly build by man-made material. Deeper in was a dark orange, or rather, an unassuming wall with a warm hue. A plant pot sat quietly by the corner, single-sidedly thinking the earth as its friend. I too grinned embarrassedly at my phony behaviours.

The interior was no different than the free-to-enter building decorated with descriptions of the stars or telescope. My opinion made my brain think otherwise of the atmosphere, however.

Something flowing out of my guts rang in my ear. It's like having a machine going in and out of your ear canal. This proved the nervous trembling beneath my stomach, churning the acid and souring my mouth.

As someone who's never walked in campus during night, I now stood in the building that I used to stared curiously and warily at. Within the darkness lights diffused out of the rooms.

My sight sharpened with the excitement. The dark means nothing to me! My prefrontal cortex coiled, so much that it hurt my brain; my throat managed to hold my impulse of moaning and collapsing back. If this goes on, I'll

metamorphose into an insect from the anxiousness.

I must complete the mission and escape before such things happen... What's the mission? Was there one?

Hiyah! I stepped forward. The sound of a foot hitting the hard floor dispersed at 340 meters per second.

I froze, like I was some kind of ballet dancer standing on her toes, and turned to look at the boy. He had a 'hm?' face. It would appear my ear drums had become so sensitised that it's a little feralised. Disregard that I wanna go T#rzan in the concrete jungle.

Then I slowly rest my sole down; only after my heel touched ground did I exhale in relief.

“Mm, it's probably okay if we just walk quietly.”

“Whoa... It's like that's the only thing we do when we run into trouble.”

“Guess I'm done with what I came for. I'm leavin'.”

“You're not a runaway Onee-san any more: you're now a night stroller.”

Man, I forgot. I'm not in a position to go anywhere.

I'll just have to move on aimlessly.

“You know, I find it a little harder to think of you as my older.”

“S that out of love?”

“Nope, just worried that someone is lying about her age.”

That's troubling. But I'm pretending we're the same age anyway, so I didn't care.

I don't mind being a little reckless as thanks for his willingness to be involved with me.

Hands on the wall with thought of leaving my footsteps behind, I secretly proceeded. I thought maybe that sneaking around would be easier, but I noticed something as I felt a cramp building up in my foot: I had shoes on. I turned, and saw the boy was the same and even left foot prints.

I frantically take the shoes off and put them in my bag. 'You too,' I lipped. The boy noticed and casually kicked his shoes off. Bare feet.

“Cold?”

“I levitate about 3 millimetres from the ground anyway, so I don't know.”

“That's not an alien — that's a futuristic robot.”

We chatted while going forward.

Dun dun~ Dun dun~ Dundundundun~ dundundundundun~

The music leaked out in my head. Sneaking about in a research building in the night — just hearing those words would put anyone in suspense.

But faint sounds of footsteps came from behind, so I'm a little scared. It's not the levitating kind either.

We passed and held off on the stairs and continued deeper into the hallway. I looked back in front of the room with lights seeping through the frosted glass.

“Heads up, someone's there.”

“Why have you occasionally used manly words since earlier?”

“If we get found... Mm... Are we gonna get mad at?”

“No, we'd get tortured. Shocked for sure.”

“Shoot... I'd get an afro. Will the helmet help?”

“No, but button mashing may help. Who knows.”

“”Hmm.””

Troubled teens X 2. After imagining the electrocution, we bent our waist down.

We kept a posture like a baseball player about to go for a slide to carefully erase our footsteps while passing by. I heard slippers or something inside, how boring. Felt pretty realistic though. We could only keep our gait strictly at a one-two order. A slow-mo recap of the end of a one-hundred meter dash would probably look like me now.

Meanwhile the boy nonchalantly passed me with calm steps and overcame

this challenge of a door. He placed a hand onto the wall, watching while waiting.

I was going to yell at him for being so cocky, but I was in front of door so I had to quietly go through the rebar in my mind. Keep still.. Keep still... Keep still... I'd like to erase the periods, but reality is a cruel mistress.

After spending five hundred percent more time than the boy, I rested from just a little away from the door. By slapping the trembling knees I attempted to train them.

“No tricks allowed.”

“You're the one who acted alone.”

“No talking back either.”

As a person about to enter second year, I am able to educate my juniors. That's my plan on not being looked down by the young'uns. During middle school... Now's the time to turn failure into drive.

The boy moved behind and let me lead; it seems that the lecture worked. If only my juniors are obedient like he.

We progressed slowly, with a half-crouching pose that seemed to sooth the nerve.

As we closed onto the wall at the end.

A sound came from the door we were just at; I spun my head around. The boy also leaned back to stare at the door. Time slowly drifted, but to no one's assurance.

The door opened; when I saw the handholding the knob appeared, I let my knees touch the ground. I thought if we were to run the footsteps would expose us, so I didn't move.

On the side of the hallway I silently curled up. Just in case I could run, I pushed my toes against the floor to ease the weight off the legs.

Slightly afloat the legs, and become a chair, a stick... There's a lot of thing I could be, but I mostly want to be a rock.

Almost like an old man hiding in a Tanuki costume — a round and pink creature. I want to mould into a stone to hide my already thin presence.

Movement grew everywhere; from the epicentre of the heart, places like beneath the chin, neck, side of the stomach started beating like a school child banging mindlessly on a castanet. I wanna move.

Pitter, patter... The sound of slipper dragging on the floor joined us in the hall.

The forehead plastered onto the floor could almost feel the footstep distancing from us. I don't blame my shoulders slacking, but I kept the same pose.

"I think we're good." I raised my hat and sat down after the boy shook my shoulders.

"Phew~ My life's just got shorter."

"Same. Thankfully they weren't coming this way."

"Actually, since we didn't get caught, our lives actually grew."

"That's optimistic. So why did you runaway?"

Leave me alone. Even without facing backward, sad things were still coming from the front.

I stood up and dusted my butt, all while letting the cramp building in my legs out.

That person may have been going to the second floor, as the echoes of staircase resonated in the long hall. Now our steps could be disguised, going forward would be easier. Yet since we knew someone is with us, the tension grew.

"Foot...step... With the sound of hard floor, and the unreliable light of the hand torch..."

"Dust floating about, and the pungent smell grew stronger. The floor gathered with ashes left footprints other than our own."

"The report of alien lifeforms left by the vanished researchers had its date stopped from weeks ago..."

“Well, not everyone alien look like freaks.”

He looked intrigued too, and you can tell from just his mien; but his changed the attitude just to disagree with me.

The corner was ahead. I moved slowly with wall to my back. Something kept bumping onto me so it hurt, but we arrived.

I leaned to see the deep end. Whoa ho...

“I've spotted the stairs to the hidden facility. We did it, Jeff.”

“Really? Give me the details, Paula.”

We arbitrarily gave each others spy names. Now we're on the same page.

Mm? Oh yeah, we'd never introduced ourselves, never mind the names.

But we've been doing things, and even came here together. It's pretty amazing from a bystander point of view. In a way it's a space-class interaction — something strange that shouldn't exist in my daily life.

“Mm? I see something below that has the name. I can't see from the lack of vitamin A though.”

“What I could see that the cowardly Onee-san couldn't seems to be the storage for materials.”

Mm... Material of the aliens? There might even be UFO artefact or element XYZ in there gathering dust.

That or something that cannot be publicised because it's an alien production plant. In order to improve the numbers that the natural breed lack, they want to appeal to the public with cheap, tube-grown type... This isn't about fishes, by the way. Oh yeah, natural beef is hard to find too, but since I don't like it I don't care.

“Alright, let's check it out.”

“Finally, to save my imprisoned brethren.”

“Mm...?” Was that the setting?

Walking along the wall I moved closer to the stair, still confused. I began sneaking down the stairs.

After about three steps down, the distant footstep disappeared. From the dispersal of the sound, the uneasiness faded; I moved my tongue.

“Mr. Alien.”

“What's wrong, Earthling Onee-san?”

“Are ya a tea-buddy with the alien that's supposed ta be in this underground facility?”

“He usually makes Nikujaga and shares with me.”^[5]

“For real? I didn't think potatoes are the hots in space. Potatoes are pretty cool then.”

“So...”

“Mm?”

“Do you believe in the existence of aliens?”

He asked me something that's didn't bother me too much, and quite earnestly.

I paused in the middle of the staircase while staring at the boy. On his strange expression were eyes that seemed to store energy drinks, bobbing back and forth and looking mighty drinkable.

“Mm... Well, I do... But I don't think they're here.”

I ended up denying the boy's insistence that he's an alien. It didn't work.

“Correct, I am actually a real alien.”

“.....” What was I to do to such a serious face.

“A lot of aliens came here and never returned. I've came to investigate.”

“Uh, that's what we're rolling with?”

He smiled emptily to my question. It should have felt weak, but from the darkness and his own handsomeness, it looked pretty cool.

“I also happened to have been given whatever they failed to accomplish. It's pretty cliché, but we were supposed to investigate how Earthlings live. Top brass wanted us to figure out if you were good or bad.

Ahahah... I laughed lightly. Calm thyself. Be at least a little scared.

The old lady used to have us come up closely to her and tell us about this kind of things. I cringed as the wind of common sense blew onto my skin.

My old friend always end up ignoring others when she couldn't win a debate. Was that why she ended up wrapping herself in a futon? It looks like a giant asparagus roll-up.

I'm drooling...

"If humans kept capturing aliens to conduct experiments, then we probably can't be friends."

"Oh? So that's why you came here. Great work..."

"It's okay." He paid no mind to it. Tough guy, this one.

"So were you lying about looking for a way to go home here?"

"No. I really don't know how. For some reason I can't."

He shrugged. Um, can I really handle this guy? It's gonna take a bit to crack this one.

"So what happens when ya decide we're all bad? Make a meteor hit us?"

I immediately held my helmet. I wasn't concerned with me being the only survivor: There should be other good kids who ride their bikes correctly.

And I will lead those children to rebuild Japan. I plan on becoming the worker of the new world.

"Even if they're not friendly, we don't plan on harming them. You'll probably end up killing yourselves if we leave you be anyway. We think if there's a possibility, we'd take the chance to be friends though."

"Oh~ That's kinda willy nilly."

Although the gaze from above bothered me, I've figured something out.

Mm... I see where he's coming from.

"Mm, I get it. I know your name now."

"What?"

“You're Echoes, right? Mm!”

Heheh, that brings me back. When I was still in grade school, we loved that stuff. During Autumn, we have reading time before the morning classes, and that was my favourite books at the time.

“Echoes? What do you mean?” He replied with a stiff smile.

“Mm? Is that not from your time? I was for sure that that was where ya got your inspiration...”

“Inspiration... Ahaha... You don't believe me.”

The sad grin appeared disappointed. It's not real, but I wonder how much of that was the truth.

“Don't be so sad. So do ya like Earth?”

“Um~ I like you, Onee-san, so I guess I like it.”

“Oh? Like Japanophiles?”

“I guess.”

His expression recovered along with a kind smile.

Hehe! I've captivated a cutie who I don't like. It's a strange happiness that is nonetheless better than none.

After the stairs was a room even more uncanny than the strange facility.

I'd finally arrived within five meter radius of an alien. If I told those five people about this, 'oh~ We did play that kinda game before. You're still doing that, Ryuushi?”

I'm not Ryuushi.

“Mm...” I curled my knees and observed the object hiding in the dark.

A light oozed from between the door; it was so weak that it could hardly be seen unless from close by.

“They should have all left by now.”

“Wanna take a peek inside?”

“Hm? That's a great but dangerous idea.”

“Uwoh!!” The edge of the door and wall flattened my face. My face was remodelled into a pout, but now's not the time for shipping. This meant the door opened from the inside.

“Gahhhhh!”

The staff in there freaked out. Well, we did sneak in here knowing that people are in here, but they would think we're some ghosts.

I didn't realize that until I pulled my face out and started running. But it wasn't the time to calmly assess the situation.

I hit beneath my shin on the top of the stairs, flailing and almost tripped.

Because of that the shoes in my bag fell down the stairs.

“Ah! Shoes! Pain! But my shoes... Ugh... Gosh! Seriously!”

I stopped myself there, and ran back upstairs after giving up.

“W-w-what do we do! Where do we go! Are we running?! We're running, right?!”

I spoke at twice the usual speed and didn't even stop when I bit my tongue. Some said words are weightless, but I definitely felt it on my tongue. It tastes of metal, and bitterness.

“No, I'm going to the second floor too!”

“Wha dya say?!” A lot was mixed up in this moment of crisis.

In any case we ran to the stairwell we were just at. What if an alarm went off? The lungs weren't working amidst the strange happening.

The guy really wanted to go upstairs, so he turned left midway. I hurriedly grabbed his arm. It's a twig. Of course it'd be a twig on a handsome guy! Err, or is it because he's skinny he's good looking? Huh? I donno!

“We've been walking straight, so why are ya lost?! We're only 2D here!”

“Unlike you, I still have something I have to do.”

“Get lost, alien!” I chopped his forehead. It landed beautifully on his hairline.

The boy showed a pained face with a grin joyfully. At this kind of time!

“You still don't buy my story: you're the perfect example of a xenophobic Japanese. This is going to be the last, so I might as well show you.”

“Shut it and run!”

“Do you really want to run, Onee-san? After all that work?”

“Huh?” His counter questioning shocked me.

Was he making me run up here with the possibility of dying looking for aliens?

If I believed in that, I would have listened to everything you had to say.

Um... So? I didn't find the answer behind me even after broadening my spectrum.

The six year old me who had yet grown to hate my straight hair kicked me above the waist.

She's trying so hard with her tiny legs to force me to see this alien. I experienced being the parents who were forced to an amusement park by their children. What do I do?

How did dad handle a child as capricious as me?

Mm...

There's an inverted age limit here.

I have a lot of things I want to do now.

The dreams that I had when I was young contained little.

My first love was also not with me any more.

They all disappeared once I realized.

Even the last straw had withered, with nothing left to show.

I have to go back: I can't stay at a place with nothing.

But you can stay.^[6]

I looked down and felt my bangs, letting myself grow up.

I let go of the boy's hand and waved mine next to my face.

“Sorry. I want to go.”

I have to run away from the researchers in scrubs, and the young me. I want to run to a place with something.

“Hm... That so.”

He looked down sentimentally. But I was already ready to run because of the circumstance.

I'd already begun bidding him farewell from up close.

“Thank you for coming along with me! Thank you for sending me here! I'll tell my boss about this, Onee-san, and I will arrange some help to your friends in the future! See you!”

As if those were the last words, he showed that middle schooler's smile that fits his face so well. While it banished the unique mysteriousness, something else replaced and highlighted his charm.

“Got it! Bye bye!”

I sent off the boy, who was hopping at two stairs a step, with a voice loud enough to be heard from the deepest depth of the hall with an exaggerated gesture.

Until his silhouette disappeared from the corner of the stair case, I kept an eye on his intrepid advance. New footsteps echoed from further in in the hallway, so it was my time to leave.

Ok. How am I suppose to find excess energy from outside my stomach?

A power came from my feet and kicked me off the floor.



'I let go of the boy's hand and waved mine next to my face.'

I left the boy and the six year old me back there.

The sixteen year old me ran to the curious outside world.

"Phew... Phew... Phew..."

When I'm nervous, I get this fatigue that's unrelated with my usual health.

My heart is tired. The wound from yesterday has yet heal.

I came to the field outside, heaving and out of breath, and I wanted to lie down to let the fatigue in my mind fill with blood. Phew... Phew... I heard only my breathes.

Head lowered with arms on my knees, I dragged my feet to turn toward the research building. No one's following me or after me. Even though I do have a partner.

"Phew... Phew... Phew..."

I chewed on my breath trying to stop the heaving. Air seeped from between my teeth, kind of disgusting. If someone saw me they'd think I'm here to dig to find subterraneans.

"Ahem!" I gave up on that to indulge in breathing.

Once my panting settled, I looked to the light coming from the windows.

"Mm... He's okay, right?"

We didn't infiltrate a military base, so it shouldn't be too bad, but that mysteriousness that I felt when I was young still incited my anxiousness. Ugh, stomach hurts.

Ah, I never asked his name. Mm? What a rude way of interacting.

Though hard to let go (m-my curled hair, that is), I returned to my bike traversing on the rigid soil. "Oh! It's cold." Was it angry? The seat was freezing; this harmed my self esteem as a bench player in the club. Mm?

"Eh?"

I yelped strangely with widened eyes. Mm, It'd be embarrassing to imagine

the actual image.

The shoes I lost sat unassumingly in the basket.

“No way!” I looked closer. The subtle wear on the tip, the size, the colour and lack of sheen... They're my shoes, no doubt about it. Did they run off from their master and came back?

“No... way...” Could it be that the alien's elementary technology is teleportation...? “I don't think so either...”

My lower half froze from the phenomenon, but I still rigidly picked up the shoes.

Mm... There's only one other person who would know these are mine...

With that conclusion I naturally scanned around. There was nothing. No one was here to harvest the skinny carrots, or a person with sharp eyes floating in the air with white tights and a mysterious aura. Did the boy already leave? He was the one who brought them back. It's the only possibility.

But how? He went upstairs while I ran out. Was he operating at a speed that beat even mine? Maybe he's actually a Ninja (the American kind).

“Or maybe...” He threw the shoes down when he's going home on an UFO?

I looked for a note in the shoes, but they only end up becoming my gloves. I smacked the shoes together before taking my hands out. I realised I still had mud on my feet, so I just put them on.

“Haha... Haha... Haha...”

I inadvertently laughed at myself. It's so funny I hugged my belly.

The aliens weren't captured here. It has to be a lie.

He's just wondering, so he came here with the Earth representative, me, and found nothing.

The loss of drive and the misunderstanding drove me beet red.

So that's why the boy returned what I lost to me.

He wanted to use that as a cover for his slip-up, so he wouldn't badmouth us when he's reporting.

I must have saved Earth itself.

“Oh? So I'mma hero. I wonder if a questionnaire will ask this?”

Of course, I won't question anything even if he wasn't levitating from three millemetres above ground.

Even if he just explained to the staffs, and then ran off as fast as he could, passed me and tossed my shoes in there, and then ran off almost like a human.

It doesn't matter if he walked on land, or returned to space from the endless sky.

As long as we appreciate the destination, there's a home we can go back to.

“I hope other aliens are just like ya.”

Being in contact with other people gave me a proper sense of pain and passion.

Mm~ That's the best kind of things.

I will for sure fall in love with someone else in second year.

And I will make the person I liked yesterday a scar in my memory.

Ryuuko's night, the spring break of UMA, has just begun! So I must hurry back home.

My runaway trip ended in two days.

I straddled onto the bicycle's seat and adjusted my helmet.

And began peddling slowly.

The night on the brink of winter's end chilled the air that blew on my face.

But I clearly saw the road.

I stepped hard and accelerated. Even if it's the usual speed, I will keep the wheels turning to orchestrate that sound.

I tried to let this possibly invisible alien catch up.

The messy hair and wind cutting by became my speedometer.

To leave the self-deprecation that chased me behind, I sought to have my

speed higher than my temperature.

Chapter 2 - Peering at First Love

Q: Select the appropriate words to fill in the blank

[] x [] x [] = []

[Maekawa-san]

[Childhood friend Yoshino]

[Princess Kaguya]

[Written charms]

[Dyed hair]

[Going places on a scooter in a storm!]

[Continue to cosplay]

[Lady at the beauty salon]

[179.9cm]

[Memory of a summer]

Let's dye my hair. The sudden thought popped in my head.

So let's head to the hair salon after lunch without studying first, on the Sunday before the final exams of the first semester. I usually ask the neighbourhood old lady for a five-hundred-yen haircut, but since she's the type who doesn't even like dying white hair black, I couldn't put my trust on her — I had no intention to go there from the start.

“Come on in~ I can do all cuts~”

A person who appeared to be the kind owner greeted me weirdly. She was in fact the only one inside. She's cleaning the hair off the floor, presumably from the previous customer.

“Do you guys only do appointment?” I so asked, to which she replied, for some reason, cheerfully. 'Hahah, that's kinda like being ask by the cashier if you're going to eat all thirty burgers on your own~

“It's all right. Just sit anywhere you want.”

Under the lure of her bright but slightly childish voice, I walked in, avoiding the hair while looking around the somewhat cramp store.

The wall and ceiling had white a base, and the decorations were quite tasteful. What looked like the cable television played quietly in the corner; air conditioning rendered the time in this salon to pass slowly. Compared with the heat in my house, I thought it'd be worth it to just spend my time and money here and wait it out. There's only a fan in my room.

I sunk into the chair and stared at the me reflected onto the mirror ahead. Oh... I think I forgot my contacts. Everything is blurry and I looked scary. Beams could come out of my eyes.

The female owner who occasionally appeared in the mirror with a broom and dustpan appeared to be about twenty-two, three or four years old. As though she had just shed, her skin showed no sign of birthmarks or tan; she's so pale we might not be the same kind of breed. Her hair touched her waist; I had thought it could be used like a carpet if it were to completely cut off. Straight jeans and a t-shirt with rolled-up sleeves, as well as a hat hanging from her neck, she would fit right under the summer sky while watering the sun flower field. The sound of her plastic slippers only aided the youthful aura she emanated, as well as her beauty that is as if the world's unfairness and fate's mischief themselves. Her height of roughly 160cm was also a source of my admiration. I didn't know there existed another person who attracted eyes in a different way than I, like a collection of people's envy.

I picked up several girl magazines in front of the mirror to kill time. I wondered if many of the models on display were taller than I am.

After the cable TV ended on a song, the lady came behind me with a little cart filled with tools. 'Thanks for waiting.'

She gently brushed my head after clipping my hair up and dressing me up like a Teru-teru Bouzu. She complimented on my hair, 'you have good follicles,'

making me nod embarrassedly. (TL Note: Teru-teru bouzu 照る照る坊主 are believed to bring good weather, and are hung often during rainy days. In Japan they are often made with tissues or handkerchiefs like a little person in robe)

“You must be new here. You're very tall!” She seemed in awe. It's the usual comment I hear meeting someone, so I blankly replied, 'yeah.'

“Must be pretty handy when you're stealing people's fruit.”

“.....” That would be the first time someone had said that. And so, I inadvertently looked at the owner's face with the mirror. What kind of life in these twenty or so years did she go through can she bring such exquisitely chiselled smile?

“What do you go by? And... are you a student?”

I revealed my name while introducing myself as a middle school senior.

“Mm... Maekawa, huh. That's a good last name.” She nodded proudly. Just my last name?

And... it went like that again. For some reason, almost no one calls me by my name. Aside from my parents, people who were good friends... and they exist, but he also calls me Maekawa since I was young. It's not like my name is hard to say; I never understood why. It is a very small secret, in contrast to my height.

“So, what would you like today?” The snipping of scissors came from the mirror.

“Hair dye. I want blonde.”

“No way?”

She squealed unbelievably. My eardrum shook, kind of like when I'm dry coughing; I thought she would proceed without a word. I turned around rigidly to look at her.

“You're going to look like the Kinkaku-ji. I don't think you should.” (TL Note: The temple in Kyoto plastered in gold)

The owner denied my request while spinning her scissors. She even rebuked me with what may or may not even be an analogy, so I didn't feel convinced. Who knew that going to an amusement park with animal mascots in Chiba

instead of Kyoto or Nara would have such terrible repercussion... It'd be difficult to have this kind of regret.

“Maekawa, I seriously think black is the best for you.”

“But that's the real colour.” She's telling me to just leave like this. Does she not want business?

“Yep. I recommend you to keep it this way.” She put her hand on my shoulder.

“Nope, let's do blonde.” I don't want the 'status quo' anymore.

“What about brown?”

“No, and no silver either.”

“Mm... I understand.”

Still smiling, she easily retracted her advice and began preparation.

“Oh yes, would you like to trim a bit before the dye?”

“Yes, please.”

“Alright.”

She wet my hair with the sprayer and began cutting my hair skilfully. It'd be bad if she wasn't, so I was at ease.

During the process, she casually asked many questions. Rather than alleviating my boredom, I think it's more about satisfying her curiosity. For example, she asked what's in for middle schoolers, if I liked persimmon, what the boy I like looks in number (Pff!). Her bombardment of questions made me think that perhaps her mouth was nimbler than her hands.

After answering all her questions earnestly, she commented that I 'keep up with my appearance.' I nodded slightly in agreement.

As we prepared for the dye, she asked. Finally, I thought.

“Why are you dying your hair? It's your first time, isn't it?” She asked in the most nonchalant way possible.

“I just do, because I want to become a different me.” There went the reason

that wasn't a complete lie.

“Really? You'll still be ‘you’ afterward, though. You really want to go through with this?” She replied easily.

Because of what seemed like a metal bowl landing on my head, I pretended to not hear. Sometimes, an adult's wise opinion is just a road too smooth for the youth. I think.

And so she's done.

A me who didn't seem to absorb much light appeared in the mirror.

“What do you think? Like a rip-off of Kinkaku-ji?”

“I guess...” Doesn't she care about her customers? Can't you just give a compliment?



'A me who didn't seem to absorb much light appeared in the mirror,'

I could admit that my head looked like Ashikaga Takauji's, though. I have a few wigs for cosplaying, but this would be my first time dying my hair. Hm~ so this is what a new me looked like. (TL Note: Ashikaga Takauji was the first shogun of the Ashikaga shogunate)

The teru-teru bouzu had turned into a shiny girl, but I didn't feel any differences. At most I began imagining about my mother's and others reaction to my delinquency. When I sit uneasily and depressingly in class before the test starts. I might be mistaken as a decoration with gold plating, I thought detachedly.

"You like it?"

"A tourist attraction is still better than an oversized dummy."

I divulged my thoughts honestly and stood from the chair. As if guided by her, I walked up to the counter, face to face with the owner.

After looking at the fee chart written on the penguin-shaped board, I withdrew several bills and some coins from my purse.

'Thank you,' the owner said after giving half of the exact cash back to me.

"Just half is fine."

"Why?" The causeless pity put me on guard.

"I'm not about to do business malpractice." Cha-ching, she voiced the register machine.

"I don't understand." Now I'm worried about modern Japanese tomorrow.

"I just don't think 1 times 1 is 2."

The owner left with her iconic, spirited toothy smile. She picked up the broom and dustpan leaning on the wall, thinking to herself, 'what if I don't have time to clean up with all these people coming in?'

I didn't want to lose more confidence before testing, so even if I didn't want to, I still put the money she returned back into my wallet and pushed the door out.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Hope to see you again.”

She waved with the broom. I bowed and walked out.

The moment I exited, the air touching my skin rose in heat; the dampness grew in my heart, adding that much weight onto me.

“Whoa... I can see the light.”

Looking up, the hair on my forehead melted into the sun, its existence almost gone.

Let's go home... and study.

As if holding a golden umbrella, I followed the swaying of that colour I've yet gotten used to on the way back.

I wanted to dye my hair.

There are many reasons why, and they rose their hands in me.

“Are you actually a bamboo?”

Kiiko once asked while we were eating school lunch.

We both stopped the motion of tearing and ingesting the rye bread and looked at each other. Kiiko's eyes were smiling, and mine were... hm... at least squinty. I couldn't see very clearly.

“Are you saying I'm Princess Kaguya? That's quite the compliment, but I don't have any dresses so fancy.”

I knew she's joking, but I had to try and play dumb. I reached for the milk carton to divert my sight, and started sucking on the straw.

“I remember you being the third from the last when we were lining up in sixth grade.”

The girl who was taller than the average height by 2 cm in seventh grade is now being mentioned the time when she was shorter than the average sixth grade at sixth grade.

“Uh... really? I'm used to this height now so I don't remember.” I made a joke along that line.

“Now you will still be the last in line if we lined every girl up in this school up. Now that's scary.”

“I guess our school lunch is just that good.”

“What, are you making fun of me for having left over? That's rude, Maekawa!”

“No, I'm just saying I eat too much.”

When this conversation took place, in other words during the December of my second year in middle school, my height was still around 170cm.^[7]

At that time, there were still a few boys who were taller than my line of sight. And now.

Middle school third year, summer in terms of both the calendar and temperature, July.

I'm already over 180cm. Obviously the genetic engineering was a success. I was like a Jingu staff that could only grow one way. Frankly I'm both shocked and troubled.^[8]

A lot of problems followed my sudden spurt of growth.

First is the exacerbation of joint pain; my leg cramp increased from once a day to twice a day. I grew taller, to a point that my bones and muscles were pulled to their limit. When my legs seize up in the night, I don't even have a chance to cry as my face struggled in pain. I wanted to wail to this unreasonable world and the parts above my shoulder uncontrolled by me.

All clothes including uniform had to be re-bought. And because of my hobby from since late elementary school — cosplay — I had to change everything.

Since my appearance strayed further and further from my ideal, my dream had been demolished since the woman inside the mirror became a giantess. I no longer strive to become 'a different me,' but rather 'the thing after I've changed a little.' I'll be the Onigiri boy (Katsuobushi flavoured).

Those are two bad things. Actually, there's more.

The times of which I've been branded with 'disappointment' by those around me increased. Naturally, such height should be associated with physical capability. But I implore everyone to look closely: I don't have any lateral growth; I'm just a skinny beansprout, so don't expect anything out of me during sports festivals. For instance, I would run out of energy after throwing two balls. I end up as the rope in tug of war. I have problems such as... wind resistance during a baton race.

My family had me help clean the windows in my house. After raising my arms for ten seconds, I passed out like I have anaemia.

It's terrible, really. I now have to be careful when I'm entering or leaving a car, and the only real advantage I have is when I'm waiting for someone. I stuck out, you know.

Aside from my incongruent height, the blonde hair began covering me on the Monday of early July, when exams began. The stare-attack I was so used to assaulted me once again.

On the way from the lot to class, I ran into several acquaintances; their glances seldom came with words. Was it too intimidating? Not many people have blonde hair, but there are still plenty people like me.

A wave of noise rippled after I entered the classroom that was twice as gloomy as usual. Classmates desperately clenching onto their books looked up and observed me before the first class began.

I scratched my cheek; after I've confirmed that 'he's' not here yet, I walked to my seat. Putting my backpack onto the hook next to the table, I rest my face on my palm. There seemed to be no desks or chairs that fit my size. It was cramped, and even resting my legs beneath proved to be challenging. When I lean forward to lie down, half of my head goes out of the table. As a side note, my growing feet also frustrated me.

Whether she heard or saw, Kiiko came running with a math textbook still in hand. She'd ran here from a separate class, how diligent. "Wha? Wha~" She marvelled at me and circled about, like a monkey in a zoo. And I'm the monkey? How sad.

“What's going on? Amazing. Is it a wig?” She poked the side of my head.

“Hm... I dyed it.” I answered coldly. It's not like I'm a polite person anyway, but that's not me bragging.

“Really? I thought maybe your dad's gene finally appeared now that you're all grown up, and you're now blonde and powered-up.” Her words from then on were like birds chirping; without a care she continued remarking with what sounded like Japanese. The person who dubbed her Kiiko was the infamous Touwa Erio.

Her hair was something of a mystery, far more impressive than my blonde hair. I also heard that it's her real hair. Apparently she was the only member of the astronomy club, and a space enthusiast who even brought a telescope to watch the stars on the school rooftop.

But we weren't friends, and we weren't in the same class in middle school. What's strange was that people use whatever she called others with. Perhaps she had the power of linguistics.

I don't deny unscientific things, but only if they somehow benefit me. I guess it could be because I live here. “Chirp chirp, chirp.” Kiiko's words just didn't stand out... So I just changed her voices. I did want to do some last-minute cram, so I just made her go away.

In the end the irritating bird girl left, giggling, without ever spanning her wings.

I flipped through the textbook. After finding a random page to start, I begin going through the formulas and reading the texts. I was a little uneasy, and found myself sneaking peeks at the class' doorway.

Am I an idiot? I scolded myself for underestimating the test yesterday, then my eyes moved on their own.

It's Yoshino. Yoshino Takeshi. He lives in an apartment, five minutes and twenty-three seconds away with a seven-year old's footstep, and one minute and thirty-six seconds with the gait of a gigantic, 180cm girl. Hm... He's a certain boy.

Odd how I put it. Oh well. What I mean to say is... we're childhood friends.

He's the type of athlete who'd find time to practice on his own before coming to class, when club activities are suspended during testing period.

As usual he sucked on a bottle of milk on his way to school.

Without batting an eye he sat down in the seat four rows ahead of me to the right and opened his backpack.

I thought he'd at least look at me once, so I was ready to show him my new look, squeezing my textbook. It was for nothing though.

Honestly it's fine, since the hair was just a proof of my change.

Uh... Wow... I was using the book to hid my face, but at the same time I wondered if I actually did that.

I felt that I just couldn't conceal the entirety of my body.

When I was little, I used to look up at Yoshino from his side.

We made a promise, so he became enamoured with the laughably small Maekawa-san.

However...

The friends have become strangers. Our eyes used to be close and met one another's, but now mine could see the distant view.

Vertical and lateral distance left even my lanky arms helpless.

Without me even able to lament about the result of my first day of exam, it went from day to night.

"You shouldn't worry about your height! Crocs and sharks are so much bigger! A whale would swallow you in a bite!"

"I'm more on the mammalian team."

While dealing with a slightly obstructive customer chewing on grilled squid in the corner of the store, I picked up the plates and utensils; occasionally I wash these things, take orders, and say 'welcome' to customers passing through the door. It's quite a handful actually. But if I get paid, my speed increases by fifty percent.

Due to 'after deducting cost of labour, if the bar's not running well, our live is

affected too,' sometimes I get forced into helping the family business too.

'If you practise regularly you shouldn't worry about a test.' That's the view my parents have when it comes to last-minute cramming. As long as I get the result, however, I couldn't care how.

Perhaps my parents are serious, or just quite ethical?

In this boisterous restaurant unrelated with the word sophistication, giant cotton candies of the summer heat smothered me. By the two electric fans next to the TV and on the ceiling blowing at their hardest, the warmth and alluring smell of the food were pushed out of the front.

The aroma would make any hungry person moan; to a regular office worker we're just nuisance and loud noises. Plus the smell sticks on your clothes.

My family runs a skewer pub. The restaurant sits in the shopping district known for its desolated state. Since our neighbour is a Western style restaurant, it's more than a little misplaced. No, maybe it's fair to even say that this shopping district itself is like a patch of moss growing on this beauty city of a rock. It existed before the city's development, and was abandoned; its people, thanks to a conscientious beautifying effort, were more likely ostracised.

And those who live in places livelier simply view this part of town as a tiny slum.

I understand what they mean by standing out... But thanks to the surface of the city being renovated, the dirty little secrets had to be sequestered.

I thought this place functions perfectly as a way to contain the messy and chaotic elements.

People also often report sighting of UFO, so I'm sceptical whether a 'prideful' city can even be achieved. To this day I am still in awe.

Let's keep the name of the store a secret. After all, my name is written clearly on the red curtain, so you may check that out instead. What? You can't? Let's see then... Call me 'Maekawa-san.'"

For some reason, even the customers started calling me -san recently. When I was still running around as the store mascot in elementary school, they referred

me as '-chan.'

Now that I am the mascot girl, naturally I wore the sign on both front and back — now that's the real mascot girl. But due to the poor range of motion, my parents didn't like it too much, and the customers didn't react well to it.

Why? The joke wasn't received well. Perhaps along with my growth, I've become too avant garde?

But every now and then someone would still laugh, so I consider this a pretty good country. Now I'm assured.

One of the very few people would be that person considered as a regular sitting in the corner chewing on a squid. She calls herself the real Princess Kaguya.

She often wore a red yukata, a pair of black flip flops; her long hair only had the bangs straightened out, and she always wore a red safety helmet when she's on the move with a scooter without a care to the traffic law. Such a lifeform exists in this town.

But supposedly she's never been yelled by the police. According to herself, 'how could the Earth's law apply for an alien?' The law aside, I hope she'd follow common sense at least; whenever I mocked her so, she would just smile.

The self-proclaimed twenty-four year old stood only at 147cm. What that meant is that even with a 30cm ruler attached to her head, she wouldn't surpass me. She looks just like a Zashiki-warash when she sits in her corner; when I pointed that out, she just laughed and said, 'good, then I guess I'm perfectly in sync with the Japanese aesthetic.'

Looks like this princess is always on the opposite end.

“Why Princess Kaguya? You own a place on the moon?”

“Mm? Well, let's see... Ah... I don't have enough fingers, but I think it was six years ago? Something amazing happened back in my home town. Since then We've always been Princess Kaguya!” It could have been the alcohol, or maybe it's just how she is, but the strange phrase was thrown onto the table. (TL Note: Since I do not have the Japanese text, I could only surmise that the word used here is わたくし, which is very formal way to address oneself. Whatever the case

is, it's a dignified pronoun meant to also indicate humbleness, hence the usage of We)

“Sweet. Then head on home.”

“You're right. Gotta go back on the next full moon.”

“That long? I mean now!”

“You're so mean!”

“That how things work here!”

I drove out the financially unhelpful midget who stayed for two hours here on just a squid and beer.

While still complaining, she overheard the TV forecast on the typhoon that will, in a few days, arrive on mainland; she drunkenly muttered 'oh no~ I have to go back now,' worrying about something on a different time scale.

A total drunkard who couldn't tell from her front to back. 'Eheheh,' she laughed creepily and paid the exact amount at the register before leaving shakily. 'Bye bye~'

Since she shows up twice every week, my parents would always send her off with a smile. I don't: I'm actually worried. I know she's already working, but is Japan's future really in safe hands?

A lot of adults are a little odd in this town. I just have the feeling. The person in the salon from yesterday too, she's just like another one of the locals... Right, I felt this sense of 'alien' on her.

I'm not big on the extraterrestrial, or power of the universe, but I know that the inhabitants of this town are mixed with something strange. And it seems that the alien-invasion-talk works in every family — what a strange place.

I always thought about going to a different place if I were to go to a university... Even if it were in the sticks, I wouldn't mind if it's far away — I never fit in here.

And so I spaced out delivering plates slowly and sadly, occasionally cooking, and once it's ten, my mother let me go. While taking the apron and sign off, I wondered if she letting me off an hour early was due to the test.

Our house is in a different location. The restaurant is in the shopping district, while the house is in the residential area. I'm so afraid of being attacked in the night road... That's a line I can only say if I were 30cm shorter, I think.

Take a shower and study for the test. Something else besides fatigue slowed my pace down; with tired gaits different than the princess from before, I left through the backdoor. I wound up in the middle of the street.

In front of the store was Princess Kaguya's favourite carriage of a scooter, made in the moon. It's not an abnormal sight. She typically rides her scooter here, only to leave it here when she goes home drunk. The following morning before work she would come and retrieve it. It's a pain, but according to herself, 'I'm cool with it, so it's fine,' so it's never been changed.

She's actually older than I am. Must be because we've known each other for so long, sometimes I don't bother watching my words with her. That's also why I forget about that fact sometimes.

I swatted at the moths flying under light outside, and began the anaemia routine, 'ugh~' I gave up; I took off the lock to our family bicycle. My parents enjoy walking hand in hand in the dark of night, so they don't need these wheels. They'll find their way back to their nest with love. As their daughter, I'd like to do nothing less than throw pebbles at them.

Guess I'll wear the eggshell I recently bought instead of the signboard tomorrow.

It's an outfit that has a cracked egg on the top and bottom; it separates when you're standing, and it becomes an egg when you sit. The exposed legs are hilarious, and there are even fruit versions.

Cosplay is great, because it attracts others' attention, in a good way. That's what I like.

I couldn't see the moon amongst the not-so-tall three-storeys buildings lining the shopping; the bike moved forward. With a tap on the ground to start, I stepped deep into the pedals.

The middle schooler given the duty of wearing a helmet, me, allowed the night to freely see my blonde hair (please overlook this). I wondered blankly:

comparing me to that scooter princess who, surprisingly, wears a helmet while riding, who's more illegal? Still pedalling, I eyed the lights permeating from people's houses.

The closer I was to my house, the weight sitting in my stomach grew bigger. My breath reeked of acid.

More precisely, I worried about my neighbourhood. My eyes were darting about. If a police officer were to see me now, he's going to think I'm some thief who forgot her makeup looking for her mark. As far as I know that's how fishy I was. Ahahah (stiffy laughter).

My childhood friend Yoshino might just appear! (Think of it as using an exclamation to hide your embarrassment) If we ran into each other right now, he couldn't possibly just ignore me. Don't even mention my butt — I won't even be able to hide my face. What would Yoshino do? My heart accelerated.

It's not wishful thinking, that we're so conscious of each other... At least I believe so.

But not for the same reason. I could follow Yoshino with my eyes and stride, and this gigantic body could easily enter his vision. Yoohoo! But that must be also why my life is so difficult. Yoohoo!

Yet Yoshino seemed to be deliberately ignoring me.

It must take quite a bit of effort to not think about me, or pretend to not see me. I will applaud him for that. Clap, clap clap~

And so whether it's in the class, morning, period, afternoon and then after school.

Yoshino refused to talk with or look at me. But I've grown used to it.

Still...

'You dyed your hair.' After he said so, he grew upward and pulled my hair.

Somewhere inside of me had hoped that it would lead to a conversation. Am I an idiot?

Yoshino was a big bully. I spun my mechanical pencil; like a compass or a hard disk, it led to my rumination.

I couldn't recall an English vocabulary during the test, but the memory easily replayed itself.

The sound of mechanical pencils and paper shuffling that would fill a classroom became the sound effect.

In the summer when Yoshino still wore shorts, he was timid, mindful of other's eyes, and banal. He looked down on me, who was smaller than the giant doll in my hands, and pulled on my hair. Ah... here we go.

I don't know if the cicadas were crying in the real world or my head. I couldn't know — I didn't need to know, because either way it was just perception.

Yoshino was the only kid around my age; naturally I didn't want to play with a boy, and stuck to talking with my dolls. Suddenly, a falsified report appears. Of course that wasn't the case: Yoshino dragged me everywhere. Be it summer, winter or fall, I'd look at the sky.

Because he'd pull my hair from the top, obviously I would.

When there's nothing to talk about, he'd turn around and shout, 'heh! Troll Doll!' And when I would look down, troubled, he'd say, 'Ah... Uh... You're really tiny.'

But I don't hate Yoshino; the opposite actually. I'm not saying I'm an extreme masochist though, because he protected me in all sorts of ways. When other kids called me a midget, Yoshino would hit them.

It would end up as a brawl, and he never held back. Without a doubt, there are times of wins and losses.

The reason wasn't that he couldn't tolerate others making fun of me, but that he hated others for having the same intention as he did. It's a childish thought. That's what he told me, and perhaps, when he would look away, he had other reasons. Of course, I had no clue at the time.

Yoshino dragged me around and fought with other people. But I was the chosen one. I felt that 'he' needed me. And I was glad, and blushed about it. So whether it was him hogging me or pulling my hair, I never resisted beyond saying 'that hurt, stop that.'

But I learned later that it's only because I was smaller than Yoshino. I'll push that thought into the back of my head first. The most profound memory I have with Yoshino is... Oh, here it is.

We discovered a shrine deep inside the forest. Shielded from the elements by the surround trees, the building stood solemnly without much dilapidation. An ancient paragraph described whatever was worshipped here, but for two kids who had only wrote first grade Kanji, it was beyond us. Even with my level 4 certification, I still don't believe I could read it. Though that might be more of an issue with my eyesight.

I recall catching cicadas there. Because of my fear of flying cicadas, Yoshino wanted to catch one to show it to me. I didn't want to go, but I still did. Then we found the shrine. It was dirty, possibly because no one cleaned the place regularly.

We walked around the shrine; it's not like I knew, but I thought it was a shrine or something along the line. I figured I would make a wish. I don't know why, but I wrote down on the wishing charm for Tanabata that 'I wanted to grow up,' and tied the thing on an old tree that's nowhere close to being a bamboo. I couldn't reach it, so I had Yoshino put it there for me. The payment was my hair being pulled. Nothing unusual. (TL Note: Tanabata is a Japanese festival originating from the Chinese one with the same name. It's to celebrate Orihime and Hikoboshi's annual reunion, which falls on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. In the Japanese festival, paper strips known as 短冊 tanzaku would be written and tied onto bamboo with wished written on them)

I don't know if the charm worked, but if it did, it only worked now seven years later. As if a surgery had taken place, I grew exponentially during the second year of middle school.

There's actually an ending to this incident: My parents couldn't stand their daughter's pain for being so short, so they secretly injected some growth accelerant during my sleep. When I first heard about this two months ago, I somehow thought, 'no wonder Santa always visited me in my dreams,' and accepted the surreal explanation. Should I hate them? Or thank them for their concern? And when does the genuine Santa visit? The conditions are too vague, so maybe I should just get my good kid card stamped, and wait for Santa to

arrive?

In any case, my dreams were fulfilled.

Despite calling me a troll doll, he never called me a she-troll.

When I told him that I was taller than he, he didn't grow taller to pull my hair. He didn't do anything; he stared with eyes calmer than water, like the surface of a road.

Our distance grew as fast as my height stretched.

End of replay. It could be said that it ended because of the sleepiness thanks to this heat.

My memories with Yoshino always took stage in the summer. Possibly because it was during summer vacation when we spent the most time together. Human's ability to retain fond memories marvels me.

There has to be times when you are more empowered by something that's not physical nutrient.

What? The test? Hahaha... Need I say more?

White with a red score. Wonderful that red could coexist with white.

On the last day of the exams, I ran into Yoshino.

I could never dream of the day when Yoshino, who was called an idiot for channelling so much of his energy into sports, coming directly to the bicycle parking lot without stopping by the field. It took me completely by surprise when he did.

I froze first; the person who followed almost fell from his bike and frantically balanced himself. Time stopped. Other students were happily going for their bikes with a cathartic expression after the tests have ended.

The earth was spinning, but we fought against it. Cicada's cry circled us. Nostalgia. I remembered when I wrote down the wish; Yoshino must have written something there too. What was it? The sun blinded me while I tried to recall, but I stopped myself — I had to decide how to deal with the Yoshino standing in front of me first.

I had to think of something while he stood there. 'Why' Why was he avoiding me, and why did I assume he was? 'Height' Height... Yoshino grew a lot too. 'Um' Um... Do you even remember me?

Sound could not formulate into words. Under the unclear and incomplete squeal, it might just pass the expiration date.

My voice crumbled within seconds, unable to weave into anything and melted into the tasteless summer sun.

“Uh...” Yoshino seemed to speak, but his eyes moved before his mouth. What is it? A hope grew. I wished he would lead me like he used to before. That's right, my hands strained.

But the tension remained. Yoshino squinted, despite facing away from the sun, and began pushing his bike with a grimace. A great amount of time in order to ignore me again.

He looked so small that I could easily place my chin atop his head.

The me now could easily pull his short hair.

Without the courage to grab his head to stop him, I balled my hands.

He passed me and kicked at the ground. The whirling of bicycle wheels faded in a straight line.

My head turned slightly from inertia and yearning.

Almost making eye contact with me, Yoshino hurried looked back to the front.

With both legs on the pedals, he only stepped rigidly with his left; the bicycle wobblingly disappeared from the gate.

Strength drained from my shoulders.

Was it from disappointment? Or from relief?

“I...” I talked to myself while shaking the bicycle.

I wish I know.

What is it that I sought from Yoshino?

The day after the exams, Saturday, I wandered about. I wanted to be carried

off by the wind, so I dress up like dollar bill, and a 1000 yen one, at that. Though it's rectangular, since it's cloth, it's hard to replicate the same light feeling. The mug printed on it was from an older bill... Who's the hell is this? As a modern child I might not have even seen the real thing. How knowledgeable of me~ My brain's so empty~ I'm going with the wind~

Money circulates in this world, so I thought I would wander the town while contemplating on whether I was even worth a thousand yen.

Both the tests and the weather were impeccable... Maybe not, since it's drizzling outside. Forecast this morning mentioned the typhoon I heard from few days ago closing in onto this city. According to them it will arrive sometimes between tonight and next morning, and leave in two days after ravaging the area.

I thought that if I just dress up like this and stand in the yard, the wind would just carry me off into a town I've never seen before. And people would just... run away from this giant cash bill. Hm.

The wind wasn't huge, and the rain just drench the money. It'd fall apart if it were paper, but cloth does get humid after absorbing a certain degree of water. It's a pretty terrible feeling.

My bangs dripped with water and hid half my sight.

Oh yeah, I'm blonde now. I remembered the changes.

But the exotic factor waned, and the changes I gave myself burnt its life away. I wanted to be a different me; just what is this ideal me required to accomplish?

The scooter I recognised sat there. I know the helmet resting on the seat too. I was interested too thanks to a certain salon, so I revealed my lowered face.

Quietly, and with back slouching, I opened the door and looked inward. Could be the dampness, but it was colder. Before I could feel the frigidness, the sound of scissor blades crossing echoed once again.

“Ah, come on in. Young people's hair sure grow fast... Is that outfit meant to be a pun of hair (髪) and paper(紙)?”

The owner was glad about the half-baked reciprocal nature of teenagers

nowadays... That couldn't be it.

Without stopping her hands, she welcomed me with a smile. She froze for a second after seeing my outfit.

“Oh uh, it just... The red bi— I mean, scooter, belongs to someone, I think, so I just...” I don’t know why I had to change the sentence.

Perhaps I'm the rare few who considered ‘that person’ as an adult.

“Scooter? Oh, do you know Kaguya?”

She said so while pointing toward the sofa meant for customers. Princess Kaguya was playing trump on there.

With her sandals off, she kneeled on the sofa, facing off with a little girl. Well, both were little.

Upon seeing me, she happily said, ‘Maekawa, I see you’re still as tall as the average Dutch girls. What are you wearing?’ I felt like she’s a kid staring excitingly as the giant amuse park ride. ‘You looked like you came out from a mattress compressor, too.’

Since the two of them occupied the sofa, I merely stood. People outside would probably mistake me as a talking scarecrow. After what seemed to be either an imagination or words of deprecation, I looked down.

“You’re friends with the owner?” I realised I still didn’t know either of their names.

“Mm... Since before I moved here.”

Even with eyes glued onto her cards, she correctly pointed at the owner’s back.

The owner did not look back, simply replying, ‘that’s right, I’m friend with an alien.’

She’s still working. The female appearing to be thirty or so in age cut away at the hair with an ambivalent look.

I don’t know if it’s because it’s a dream, or because it’s her appearance. The slightly curled lips and face were incredible adorable, unfitting for her age.

Weird, I've seen her... Hm... No, I've seen someone like her before. No, it can't be anyone I know. What I should pay attention now to is... I looked down and saw the child, enveloped by the shadow I've created. 'Ugh... Ughh...' She moaned strangely while backing up. The princess in her red yukata saw this and laughed heartily.

"Ahahah! Maekawa's really scary, but not really dignified!" She so interjected.

"It's just my outfit."

"Ran-chan, this is Maekawa. She's our customer, and she just became my friend."

The owner, whose smile went unconcealed in the mirror, sent help.

"Ran-chan?"

"My daughter. You write it as blue, and read it as Ran." (TL Note: 藍 means blue, and can be read as Ran)

Oh~ I wrote in my mind the Kanji I don't quite remember.

"My husband said it feels really fast if you read it in English... I am the one picked the character though."

"Oh~" I replied, marvelling at the fact that she's already married. There's no tangible reason, but I had assumed her to be single. It's a bit shocking, but since she felt so mature, it's not that strange either. Lots of feelings were mended.

Then Ran met my eyes. She stared at me with these glossy eyes. Um... Felt like I was bullying her. "Ran-chan, this Onee-chan— uh, you are right? Right. This Onee-chan would like to sit down, so you should come here a little."

The princess pulled Ran-chan to her side to give me room to sit down. Ran-chan still looked a little apprehensive after moving; she just wouldn't look at me. I felt so sorry for her. Guess I will dress up like an anpan or toast next time.

[9]

I tried sitting as close as I could to the edge; I didn't really come here for anything, so I looked at my fingers.

After hearing the princess' voice for a while, someone spoke to me.

"Maekawa, are you down?" From the mirror, the owner asked me.

“What? Um... Why? Err...” Was I seen through? I put myself on guard for some reason.

“You’ve been looking down.”

That’s it? I’m a little weirded out.

“Hm? What? Are you sad?” Even the princess joined. She pulled a card from the kid’s hand and smiled. Looks like they’re playing the Old Maid.

“Not really.” I so responded, but it was largely ignored; they started, ‘I see~ Kids are really intense with their emotions. Good! My friend, why not go ahead and play this salon’s secondary job, as councillor?’ Something along that line. The owner looked slightly troubled, but she grinned still.

“Reading someone else’s heart... That’s easier than done.”

“Who cares? Just say something interesting and throw in some philosophy or some words of wisdom. Do you best.” The encouraging speaker herself went back to focus on her game.

Why do I feel like I get lumped in with the problematic crowd? Yet here I am not saying anything...

“Something interesting, huh? I would say she’s has more than I do.”

She held up a strand of the hair of a customer who fell asleep and pointed at her with it. That must be the owner’s acquaintance... or perhaps one of the regulars?

“Well... Okay, why don’t I tell the story of me becoming a hair dresser?

“it’s not super interesting, but it’s a fond memory.”

As if tossing in a bonus, the owner gave a youthful smile.

“Sure.” Half of the affirmation was deference, and the other personal interest.

“Long time ago... Haha, it’s really been long, but that’s detail. Before I moved here, I fell in love with a boy. He had a head of messy hair. He hated it when people touch his hair, so I thought that if I became a hair dresser, I would be able to cut his hair for him. That must be why I became a hair dresser.”

She stopped neither her tongue nor her hands.

The face of the owner as she spoke of the story was not that of nostalgia, but the devious smile of a child who had played a prank. Eyes squinted, as though toying with the person who had yet notice her intent.

“And what happened with you and the boy?”

“Mm? Never seen him again. I didn’t go find him, and he never came to me. I did send a letter to him as a way to inform him where I live, but he never replied.

She stuck her tongue out. Looks like that mischievous smile never left her.

“Are you still waiting for him?” A little surprising, but maybe not.

“Mm? Of course I am. I’m expecting it maybe soon, or maybe in some strange time like ten years from now on.”

“I see...”

“But I’m not expecting much.”

She easily toppled her previous statement like humming a song.

“So which is it?”

“Hahah... It’s because I did a terrible job writing the letter. And sending two letters in a row is also just weird... Maekawa, I’m telling you this because I’ve made the same mistake. It’s better to say what’s on your mind while you remember. Feelings change, you know. What you have with the other person might just end tomorrow, so I think one should just try hard and end today’s business today.”

“I feel like you guys have already established what my troubles are before I even said anything.”

“Well~ A girl’s trouble has always gotta be with love. That’s just how it is.”

“Hahah...” She’s right. I got dumped because I’m a giant. It’s too late now, I feel. Shrinking will be pretty hard.

“That’s right! Acknowledge what you want first before thinking about it, and you’ll be a heck lot happier!”

The princess interrupted from the side, shouting some words of what may or may not be life advice. When she fluttered her sleeve like that, I pictured a butterfly with red wings dancing. She then casually tossed the card away, seemingly returning to her game.

Acknowledgment before reasons. I thought I've heard that just recently.

"Oh yeah. About the letter: Don't mention that in front of my husband. He'll so angry about my first love."

"Okay." I wanted to keep to the minimum dealing with this love-dovey stuff. Sure is great for couples beyond their adolescent.

"Ran-chan, you too."

She turned to remind her daughter sitting on the couch.

"Uweh?" "Uweh~" Pinching each other's cheeks, the princess and the daughter both replied displeasedly. I almost blurted out 'Which one's yours?'

"Alright, Jojo-san, we're done here. Oh boy, she's passed out. And drooling, too."

A smiling face mouthing an expression of wonder reflected in the mirror; Jojo-san...? Anyway, snoring as she did, she only moved a little when poked in the face.

"Should we let her sleep outside? I feel like she's gonna wake up. That or she's gonna bloat."

Looks like the princess' means of solving problems has no separation between peaceful and violent.

"Well~ I don't really mind. But just what does she do anyway? I heard she came here halfway during work. I'm kind of jealous that she could come to a salon to take a nap, even if it's at my store."

"I know right~" I felt like the princess should be asked the query too. She must live quite the colourful life if she could be playing around with the salon owner's daughter.

The sight here would be what I believe is the common picture of a rural place. A napping customer, a hair dresser cleaning up the hair. A girl meowing and a

princess threatening the kid.

As the only troubled person, I didn't fit in here. I'm not a customer anyway, so why was I here?

"Haha..."

Now is not the time to be deride that yukata customer who frequents our pub, I mockingly told myself.

The typhoon came. My house wasn't in ruin, but my classmates' plan of going out this Sunday certain was.

Me on the other hand had been playing the role of player 2 blonde Maekawa-san, lazing around in my room. It felt terrible; a somewhat sad somnolence struck periodically.

Ever since my height surpassed 180cm, I've almost never had a good day. Perhaps because of that, sometimes my stomach ache — It must have become a source of my stress. The best proof to that would be the continued existence of the hobby known as cosplay that manifested at that time.

"I'm coming in." The paper door opened without being knocked on. It was my mother. Since I didn't help out in the store yesterday, we haven't met in almost half a day. I heard her walking up the stairs, so I wasn't caught off guard.

"What?" I flipped into the direction opposite to the door, displaying my disinterest with the back of my head. When mom saw my hair, she muttered, 'if only that will raise your English score.'

I agreed.

"Blonde doesn't look good on you."

Mom said so while circling to my front to sit down.

"Leave me alone."

"Princess came to the store yesterday."

"Doesn't she do that all the time?"

"She brought a friend. The girl from the salon."

"Oh... Misses Owner." I didn't catch her name.

“Yeah, her.” Neither did mom.

After looking the trembling window, she proceeded...

“After they’re a few bottles deep, they told me that my daughter seemed depressed.”

Sigh... They just had to stick their nose in. I hopped on the floor like a sea elephant or seal, as a way of retaliation.

“Did you come here to comfort me for the words of a couple drunks?”

“Yep. ‘You should believe most of your friends’ advices, but not entirely.’”

“Everyone lies, and if they’re your friends, you have to see through the lies and live happily.” That’s what my parents taught me, right?

“That’s it.” Mom nodded contently, her head bobbing left and right.

She inspected from my fingers to my hair.

“Thankfully your body is the only thing that didn’t grow taller.”

“Must be because my parents kept me so well-fed.”

Heheh~ I said so with just a little spite. Right, I told my friends that, thanks to modern medicine, I managed to grow so tall. But somehow Yoshino heard the rumour, and he gave me this super mean look. Now that was truly unnecessary.

“Mm... So that really was it.”

“What really was it?”

“After talking about this in the pub, we concluded that you must be troubled by your height again.”

“I’m not even...” I’m still growing though. So much that my stomach hurts, like a pregnant woman.

I curled up in my knees, like a snake in an animal show.

“Really? You’re a strange one to hate a model body. If I were you, I’d dress up like in one of those fashion magazines. Yet here you are, dressed up like you’re going to some school presentation.”

“I can’t even play a tree if I wanted.” I would pass out after raising both hands

while standing.

It hurt too when nobody could just ad lib and pretend I've been blown over.

"Must be true when they say parents just don't get their kids."

"Yeah. You grown-ups have heart as wide as a desert. Of course it'd be hard to find whatever thought you had as a child there." I threw out what sounded like words of enlightenment.

"So, even if it's going to do the opposite, I've come to apologise to you."

"Hah?" I could not comprehend and reacted strangely.

The picture of my mom being affected was nothing clear. She opened her mouth ajar, her voice sublimed into words effortlessly.

As though telling a story, she told me the truth.

"Huh?" A cute question unfitting for my size dangled in the air.

Common sense and rationality crumbled. Hurry, pick up the piece before they're lost in the abyss by my feet. Put them back together. The emptiness grew; like a windcock, I spun in the centre of it.

A chemical reaction exploded. The words the owner said to me yesterday mixed with my body.

The blood circulated faster. Vessels meant to efficiently deliver blood supply to the body displayed their team work, pulsing, as if to inform my lack of blood.

It bubbled and boiled; though fitting, it was in fact the knocking of the wind from the outside. Yes, the typhoon had landed. And there's a place I want to go.

What would happen if I were to go there? Something will change me. This premonition pressurised my vessels.

And so, I must destroy my favourite memories.

Nothing was forced out of my mind with words such as 'too late,' or 'it's over.'

It's not too late. End today's business today, that way my feelings can always be true to me.

Logically that's not possibly now though. I'll give it a few days since there's no

point in going out today.

Yet this feeling bursting forth exists in the me now.

“Don’t look down on us tall people!” Uhh... Typhoon!

I sprinted down and hopped off the stair, kicking off the floor of the hallway. Ignoring the shakes and anaemia kicking in, I focused my eyes. Mom said something from behind, but because of certain feelings I couldn’t care.

I slapped on the umbrella that I thought was proper for this weather and rushed out of the house.

“So, I’ve heard everything!”

What appeared to be a child standing outside of my yard yelled. Her sleeves were going crazy, like a red carp flag. Rather than her holding the scooter, it’s more like the scooter was her paperweight.

“Are you here to destroy humanity?” I spoke first.

“Nope, that’s still under discussion with us aliens. We plan on sending an agent soon!”

With a carefree expression, she lied about her background again. A princess from space should be allowed to join, right? It’s not my interest to leave remarks like that, but I couldn’t care less now.

I am now going to pinch the nose of this event that I’m not sure whether common sense or science fit better.

“Why are you here?” The gale behind her howled.

“I came to check on the location that could be changed by our power.”

“I see.” To make up for lost time I began walking.

“Actually, I left my ride at your pub. It’s not like it’s the first time, but the typhoon is coming. A human-powered tow truck known as your parents kindly move it to the storage. You came out when I came to pick the scooter up.”

I stopped this time since she was being serious. All I could say though was ‘I see.’

“Where are you headed?”

“The shrine.”

“The shrine? What’s that?” She spun the scooter around, making it face me. “I’m no expert, but hop on. I’ll go with you.” She smacked the seat.

“Why are you being so nosy?” I looked at her with suspicious eyes.

“It’d be a fond memory when I go back to the moon.”

She stuck her nose up and played the mature adult.

Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, again? As I parted my lips, rain water flew in. The words never came. I regained my grip on the rationality that returned to appease me.

“I’m in your hands.”

After calmly assessing myself, I realised that it might take a long time for me to reach my destination alone in the typhoon. I might lose this thought in me during.

Being a giant is not enough.

“Wow~ Being polite is not your thing!”

She spoke with a smile that was impervious to the wind. I followed her onto the scooter.

The storm assaulted us; even the strength to keep our mouths shut was sapped away.

“Jokes aside, why are you doing this?” It’s odd to speak so politely with this person.

“Well...” She squinted her eyes slightly, almost as if disinterested, to keep the rain out. I circled her tiny body with my drenched arm; the inside of the yukata robe almost seemed ethereal.

“Isn’t it an adult’s job to help a lost child in tears? Aliens are kind of like this to humans. Everyone knows that it’s too naïve though.”

What she said in the end was not a complaint, but it was mixed with censure.

She’s completely in her role. I was actually concerned.

“Freedom stems not from only reason, but from acknowledgement! Reason is the line, and acknowledgement is the points! So even if the process was never connected, just hop on the dots! The rules of that ‘speed is right’ is correct! Ye love not a bicycle, but a scooter!”

Princess Kaguya shouted toward the stormy clouds with disregard to the riverbed — the forefront of the upcoming typhoon.

“Ugh... I drank some water.” With that heaving motion, she once again opened her mouth.

“Listen well, Maekawa! What you’re doing now makes no sense! The typhoon is coming, and here you are heading into the shrine in that forest! The storm is coming! It’s came; it’s upon us! The alarm’s going off! Because you acknowledged yourself! But that’s the spirit! Same as when you’re playing M#rio kart! Shortcuts are more challenging, but that’s why they feel so good! Even if you lost because you keep trying, it’s still great! Listen! This is what people refer to as freedom! Only that those people are aliens!”

“Thanks for the explanation! But it’s sounds pretty human to me!”

“That’s because it’s been twenty years since I moved here! Where do we go now!”

“Right!” And since when have you lived outside of this planet! I yelled! But the wind erased my voice. The gust almost blew the scooter away, but the princess kept it perfectly balanced.

“We’ll probably die if we fall into the bank.”

“Is that something to be so calm about?”

“And you don’t even have a helmet. The officers won’t like that too much.”

“The police won’t be around in this storm, just drive.”

“Yep, and that’s why we can go without eyes looking.”

Was that why she tagged along? I almost commended her for that.

A person of 180cm height holding onto a 147cm driver; no matter the angle or presentation, anyone would find the sight amusing. Since the rain that could cover embarrassment and unnecessary words poured, I held onto the princess

and left all movement up to her.

Summer — my visions were poor, like when I was dragged by Yoshino through the words. The terrible weather imbued the environ grey — a sunless world was born.

In this picture, a crimson and reliable silhouette easily distinguished itself from the surrounding.

We chased the shadows of Yoshino and my past; with the superfast shortcut version of that, we arrived at the forest's entrance. The woods fanned menacingly.

"We have to walk from here on. The environmentalists are an annoying bunch. I'll have you know more aliens are advocates for mother nature than humans."

"I see."

The wind helped me through this topic. I got off and thanked her, all while looking at the countless entrances between the trees. I pictured the image from before to re-discover our entry point.

The fourth tree on the right looking from the road... Ah... there it is. I entered from where Yoshino charged directly into; from the same location, I invaded into the forest in hope of finding the place we stumbled upon.

Footsteps were step... step... step... and step step step. Suddenly it was duet of an oddly light tempo.

I found her there after turning my head.

"Why are you following me?"

"I couldn't find a reason not to."

She lost me. I had no strength to either rebuke or welcome her, so I proceeded silently. Halfway through I realised this object plastered on my back became a windbreaker.

"Oh yeah, what's this shrine?"

"What?"

“Oh... I mean, why are you going to this shrine?”

‘Would you like to equip this?’ The way she ended her sentence sounded like such a question; I think she also hid something from me. The grown-up asked something critical, but since she desisted from the query, I was at ease. I don’t really know why, but I had this feeling that this shrine was something more than just a building.

“We’re going to destroy it.”

“What? With this storm around I don’t even think we need to do anything.”

I won’t be satisfied by that.

The memories, the shadows, and the cherished things — the charm that’s the conglomerate of all.

I want to rip off the charm that I tied on that tree. That is my display of valour for the day.

“Sigh! If height is considered a talent, than it really isn’t for me!”

Other than valour, I also shouted something else in the middle (unsure) of the forest. I’m no giraffe, so there’s no reason to grow this tall. Still, it was now a part of me.

I guess I was mad. It was something that I refused to lose to the storm to — it’s everything to me. I wanted something to change, and I believe the possibilities were hidden in the dark of the woods.

“Boys only don’t like tall girls because we’re so few! If everyone just drank their milk and eat their meat it won’t be a problem!”

“Have you been drinking, Maekawa?”

“We run a bar! Of course liquor is in my blood!” I’m not even sure about that either!

And so, I traversed the forest, charging inward without knowing for certain if I was lost.

Upon arrive the shrine, I was dismayed.

Look around. Walk around. Try to remember. I did everything, but no one

responded to even my voice. I checked inside too, yet—

Nothing.

I saw nothing.

I couldn't find what I came for. The fan-shaped leaves fluttered. Their accessories were gone: I couldn't even see the shadow of my charm. Only the shrine remained to be destroyed by the gale.

"Why?" No one should have been here.

"This is not right." I leaned in. As if immersed in water, the clothes sunk down with weight. With what seemed like swimming strokes, I advanced slowly.

"Oi~ Maekawa, are you alright?"

"Nothing is alright!" Don't screw with me! It has nothing to do with anything?! Then why am I so tall?!

I must dig it out. Then rip it, throw it, burn it, soak it — it must disappear.

"Calm down. Tell me what's going on."

"It's gone! It's all wrong!" Because of that! It's because of that that Yoshino and I ended up like this! I know I can't go back to the past; that's why I must at least destroy it. It's the only way I can move on, or I will crumble on the way forward.

"More! Further! Further!" I cut through the woods, sending dust and mud flying. I could see what's ahead, and I searched while closing in; but I couldn't move forward: my limbs struggled laughably, and then—

"Relax." Someone touched my head, and with the tiny hand that the red sleeves flowed from.

I was kneeling in the mud. Splash! The knees that were splattered with muck were as cold as floor in the winter.

"So what if it's gone? Let it go."

Her tone was not dissimilar from correcting a misremembered math formula.

Stroke and stroke, she firmly felt my hair. The bangs covered my forehead and eyes; even looking up couldn't reveal her face.

“If all you needed to grant a wish was to hang a piece of a paper on a tree, earth would have never advanced this far. Listen carefully: Don’t expect your prayers to be answered, even if it looked like they worked. Wishes are meant for someone more specific; not the gods, but someone who could help you.”

She hit my forehead with the bottom of her palm, pushing me away on between the eyes.

Wham! I jammed my elbow into the mud and collapsed. Felt like a golem reverting to its material. I had this wild dream, that if it kept raining, would I drown in a water no deeper than 10cm? ‘Heheh,’ I laughed at myself.

“What am I going to do with you?” Princess Kaguya walked toward the shrine with this annoyed expression. Her dauntless gaits reminded me of Yoshino when he was young.

She somehow took out a stack of ancient charms that seem too frail to be touched. She then produced a brush and began the motion of writing. As I pulled my face from the mud to see what she wrote, she stingily hid it. When I stood up, she left quickly and tied the charm on a nearby tree.

“Look, I made another one for you. Don’t break this one now.”

“The charm—”

“‘I wish Maekawa would be 179.9cm.’ But here’s the thing: It’s not a prayer to the gods. I can use a magic... no, sorcery, to make people smaller. Mmm, as the Japanese would put it, I can use sorcery. Since I’m an alien. Yeah. Not just laser beams, I can even do telekinesis from my hands, like a 3D picture book. Get it?”

“I don’t.”

“That’s just cruel.”

Her face twisted together. I guess in a way she’s the type to never back down on what’s important to her.

Still...

To so easily liberate someone, ‘that’s an adult for ya.’

“Why say that now? There are giant brats and tiny adults too, you know? Like an adult brain in a child body.”

“Something in there sounded funny.”

She gave a smile indicating her intention.

I dropped my guard and almost caved.



“Why say that now? There are giant brats and tiny adults too, you know? Like an adult brain in a child body.”

Ahh... I don't need to look for an excuse anymore. She told me I just had to acknowledge myself. Not everything needs to have a definite reason. It's extremely difficult to carry out without getting used to it though.

My heart was in contrast with the weather, and neither showed no sign of waning. That's right, the storm is coming.

My life is about to begin as well... I thought.

So, let's quickly escape from this gloomy forest.

I dragged my drenched body, peppered with wound and covered with snout, back to the scooter.

“Sorry, but I want to make a stop along the way.”

“Along the way? You mean you want to go? Life doesn't have ‘stopping along the way.’ That would mean you don't have a place to go.”

“Ok... I want to go somewhere.”

“No prob.” She raised her right hand while driving. Hey.

Perhaps she noticed how dangerous that was and immediately stopped; I once again hugged her in relief.

This time, the body that was almost mistaken as an illusion undeniably existed.

Through the cloth with my cheek, I assuredly felt the firm spirit of an adult through my bones.

The place I asked Princess Kaguya to go was Yoshino's house.

“Hurry.” She urged me from the back, still straddling the scooter. I looked down, and ran up to Yoshino's doorbell knowing that it would stir quite the something up. The bell that used to need me to stretch taller was easily reached.

It's so short now that it might even strain my shoulders if I were to press this every day.

In a short while, the person inside opened the door unsuspectingly without even using the intercom. Due to the wind blowing against it, the door appeared difficult to open. The person who pushed the door out with both hands was Yoshino himself.

“Uh... Huh?” The door shut itself on Yoshino’s shoulder; he gawked in shock.

It could be because a soaked giant stood in front of the door, or maybe because I picked the day before the typhoon to come and scare Yoshino, to run him in circles.

“Yo!” Voice morphed into words, and transmitted to Yoshino’s ears.

How many years has it been?

“Uh... Oh...”

Affected by a formless chaos, he stood there affixed.

I could laugh at how stiff he looked.

“I’m a hundred-percent natural.”

“What?”

“My parents didn’t do anything to me. Meaning, my parents thought that you were scared because I grew so much. They just told me that trying to comfort me.”

“W-what?”

“That’s how it is.”

I reached out.

My fingers grasped Yoshino’s short hair more easily than I’d expected, and tugged on it.

Rip, rip... The sound of hair leaving the skin.

“.....” Tears formed in a silent Yoshino’s eyes.

I might have overdone it. Casually I tossed the hair aside and exhaled.

Even without Yoshino in front of me, I could still stride forward. Because the long legs of a giant could leave anyone behind; even from afar, they will see me.

Don't fear being distanced. Even if the past with Yoshino is devoured by ambiguity.

In this forest, before the storm arrived, a tiny grown-up taught me the way to walk.

Before he could retaliate.

Before I could regret.

I turned away.

"Good bye."

I made up my mind to leave.

And to change myself.

I turned like a kite, walking away from Yoshino in this storm.

"Oh? Done?"

"Princess."

"What's up?"

"How old do I have to be to get a scooter license?"



"She's the daughter of the CEO of a furniture company. She lives in a huge house, which is why people called her Princess Kaguya (家具屋)."^[10]

I later learned the truth from the hair salon. It wasn't even told by the person herself, but the owner.

The daughter of a furniture company sitting on the couch added, 'actually, it's more than just that.' 'Oh yeah, that's right. It's was quite a bit of time ago.' The owner remembered and grinned somewhat devilishly. Mm~ She may have been a bully before.

"Here we are. Back to normal, Maekawa."

"Thanks." I stroked at the black bangs while saying so. I dyed my hair back — the old Maekawa-san had returned.

The teru-teru bouzu that appeared momentarily in the mirror looked pretty

good even with just black and white, I thought proudly. Seeing that smile, the owner asked amusedly, 'what's wrong?' and removed the cape.

Finally I walked toward the register, and like before, with a word of 'thanks.' As I reached for the dwindling allowance in my purse, the owner said, 'just half is fine.' Similar to last time, she gave half of it back.

"Ah..." I see. I gave in this time and took it back.

So she's a clairvoyant, and an ethical business owner.

I looked at the hair dresser, considering her now to be someone who places acknowledgement before reasons.

"I'll take the rest of the money. Hahah, now you really wasted your money."

"Yeah." I nodded deeply. I also wasted a lot of my life.

From now on I want to live efficiently.

"Okay, I'm heading back too." Princess fluttered her wings toward the entrance.

She spun to wave lightly at the owner.

"Good bye, Tooe~ You should study your English for your name sake!"

"Haha. Sadly, that's the type of hard work I hate the most. I'm wasting my life, after all."

With a smile, she shooed the princess away. 'Everyone is trying to get rid of me,' Princess Kaguya laughed, disappearing as if swapping place with the door.

I wanted to see the scooter off; I acknowledged the hair dresser who bid me farewell and headed out. She was just about to put on her safety helmet, and her scooter was positioned to go.

"See ya, Maekawa. Next time, bring me the shell of a swallow."^[11]

"I won't keep you. You may go back to the moon now."

"I will." She tauntingly throttled and let the scooter gain speed.

Princess Kaguya, with her illegal helmet, rode energetically in the road again.

Wondering if she could get there with a scooter when even the bullet train

can't, I saw her off.

The battered frame of her scooter disappeared around the corner.

I could see only the pure, aqua-blue sky after the typhoon had passed.

Naturally, with the cloud gone, the scorching sun beamed down. "Phew."

I almost melted when I stepped on the asphalt road — I was like vanilla ice cream in this weather.

Thanks to the hair attracting heat, my brain gradually disintegrated.

To more efficiently transmit themselves, the thoughts about to dissipate motivated me.

I started walking.

While ruminating the phrase, 'the meaning of life is to create someone else's life.'

My neurons worked to imagine what I was to Yoshino in his story.

It's been half a year since I recovered to an eggplant.

April sixth, a breezy entrance ceremony. As a high school freshman, I passed through the gate of an unfamiliar school.

I never spoke to Yoshino again in the second and third semester after the summer, and I never needed to avoid eye contact with him. We chose a different high school, so I don't have to be careful anymore.

The gazes of my soon-to-be classmates who came to join the ceremony were upon me. Was she held back? Or a girl standing on another girl pretending to be 'me?' They stood from afar and watched closely.

Since I didn't think of a place to hide, I deliberately walked in the middle of the campus road. I grasped at my hair and looked upward; a blend of pink and traditional Japanese girl colour took the sky.

Though my hair was now black, the student ID still used the old blonde girl picture. Objectively, only my hair looked different.

But I'm Maekawa-san, a giant who everyone, be it the seniors or classmates, had to call me -san. Now that I can't become someone else, I just have to grow

fond of those words. A one-way road for my feelings.

Thankfully a lot people liked me, my height, and even my hobby (No way!). Even the owner of the hair salon said this: 'you can be the perfect fruit thief.' Princess Kaguya too would beg me, 'let me ride on your shoulder~ I wanna play super fighter bros~' The place that I worked part-time at during December told me, 'sorry, we're closing next March' and let me have a costume as the final payment. I took the eggplant. It's not like I didn't always walk around selling vegetable croquette wearing this thing. My co-worker dressed up as K#rosuke, but I don't do that stuff anymore.^[12]

Back to the topic at hand. It's a strange ting to talk about, but I've made up my mind to live every day of my live from this height.

Perhaps some will be deceived by my superficial height. I bet every club would want me in. Though I will miss my old height, I learned the fact that being tall is indeed a source of charm in others' eyes. Yoshino liked me before, but I'm the me now. I don't rely on that anymore.

I'm fortunate to have grown so big. Anywhere I reach for, I could hold onto something.

"Hng~"

This pretentious body of mine appeared even better while I stretch.

Now, let's go disappoint some more people.

Chapter 3 - Skyward Tomorrow

Q: Please select the appropriate words to fill in the blanks.

[] x [] x [] = []

[Touwa Erio]

[Old Guy]

[Astronaut]

[A grade schooler human]

[My amazing mom]

[Kashiwagi the environment destroyer]

[Training at the park!]

[Okay, fine.]

[Need to work hard at scavenger hunt]

[The same thing]

I fought with my classmates a lot.

But this was the first time the teachers and mom found out. I tried to not let my face get hurt, but the other person happened to have longer nails; she left some scratches on my face. Thanks to that, I was summoned to the staff office.

Sitting in his chair, the teacher interrogated with crossed arms. We called him Baldie behind his back. He always has a blank look, and he never hid his bias for students he liked, so almost everyone hated him. The kids he liked would try to fit in, saying how annoying he was. Grade schoolers were terrifying.

The girl sitting next to me lowered her battered head, her mouth shut with tears almost falling out. She started it, so it should have been a simple matter. She kept quiet, apparently comprehensive of the situation. Behind her was her

mother with both hands on her shoulders, who seemed to have been called to school for the first time ever. With an anxious look, she appeared mindful of other teachers' gazes, lowering her face every time when someone looked.

Mr. Baldie sighed, and then he glared this way. He demanded an explanation from me with the expression. I wanted to look away, but I held it in and glared right back.

There were plenty reasons for the fight. She called me a bastard child, my eyes and hair disgusting, and then she pulled my hair. But I didn't want to say anything, and kept my mouth closed.

Of course I couldn't say anything — not with mom here.

Mom too didn't say a thing. But she wasn't looking around either; she paid attention only to the scratches on my face. The look she had, the 'Gosh! How dare she hurt my Erio's face! I'm going to steal some skin from that kid and put it back on her face!' vibe. It's a little embarrassing getting stared at like this. Mom unsettled me far more than the teachers did.

The teachers asked with a deep voice, 'we won't know unless you say something,' to intimidate us. The other girl shuddered, looking at her own mother for help. Her mom was troubled by the eyes of the angry voice; she urged with a look. But like something's stuck in her throat, the girl glared at me with teary eyes.

It's never gonna end. I was bored out my mind, wondering if it would end sooner.

This really is minuscule compared to the universe itself.

Calling our moms over just because of a fight, they ought to stop overreacting. This is why Baldie is so unpopular. I hate him, because he made fun of my family being single-parented. So I talked back, and we've never been friendly since then.

By the way, I also hate the dad that I took after.

"Um..."

Mom's hand up popped off, in contrast to her humble voice. The teacher was

baffled by mom's abrupt comment, but asked her to speak up anyway.

Upon hearing that, mom smiled slightly.

"I'm making dinner right now. Can we go home now?"

All three people except me were speechless. I wonder what's for dinner.

That's just how mom is. There's nothing surprising there.

When no one moves, she does — that's what my mom's like. It's a bit childish, but speaking up to get things done and hating unnecessary stuff is what I love about her the most.

'No can do, I want to listen to what they have to say,' the teacher said so strictly to deny mom of her request. 'Mm~' she moaned quietly.

"Mm... All right..."

Oh, she's totally not listening. When she nods like that, she's never listening. That's just how mom is: She never listens to the other person if it doesn't help her.

But that's what I love her (you already know). How my-mother of her.

"Then punish them both. See ya."

With a grin, mom pulled me up from the chair. As I looked up, she joyfully rubbed my head, 'we haven't walked home together since parent visit day.'

Holding my hand, she led me outside of the office. Still smiling, she paid no mind to the teacher's yelling. I expected no less from my mom.

My grades are going to look horrible this quarter, but that's fine.

Onto the hallway, mom looked down with eyes only slightly ajar; she never stopped beaming. I thought she would scold me despite sounding so gentle; my teeth clenched, and my lips pursed.

As though waiting for me, she spoke shortly after.

"You're good at fighting, aren't you, Erio."

Her hand began swaying with those words.

Her grin seemed proud.

My preparation was for nothing.

Regardless, I don't know why, but tears burst out as I sniffled to hold them in.

"Uuu..." I tried.

I am Touwa Erio.

A human grade schooler with hair and eyes from out of this world.

Stars in the expansive sky covered my every dream.

And they are there, every night, in the great heaven seen from my yard. I could almost sense the depth of it, standing in the autumn breeze. Clouds thin like pie crust scattered lazily: It wasn't a night perfect for stargazing.

"Don't be out for too long. Erio being sick = Mom not working."

"Okay." I answered mom, whose head poke out of the living room.

Almost every morning she complains 'Ugh... My head hurts. It hurts so bad it's like a superpower is going to split it' 'My tummy hurts~ I'm staying home' like a stubborn kid. I think that's why Tamura Obaa-chan always treated her like a kid.

Mom neither yelled at me nor asked why we fought. She put a bandaid on my face, and that was it.

She would probably listen if I were to speak up, but I didn't want to. I talked about the music test instead during dinner. The recorder's sound that I made, the clam soup in my lunch having sand, and some such prattling.

I always sit across from my mom when we eat in the kitchen. There's no one else, but that's okay. It's always been like this, and I love mom too. She often talks about her job; she runs a snack shop and that's awesome.

"I just hired a part timer today. She's so young that not even the whole Zodiac would put her on my age. Eek, that's scary!"^[13]

My house is always so rowdy because Mom is as loud as five people (according to Obaa-chan).

We had ginger grilled-pork for dinner. It was great.^[14]

"Back to business."

Stargazing resumed. That sounded poetic.

I thought that the sky was covered by earth during the day, and space during the night. Currently it was the universe.

Staring at the firmament filled with my dreams and goals never bores me.

I must go there one day, I thought passionately.

“Hooah!”

My hand pointed to the brightest star.

I want to be an astronaut. Not many are like this, but this town is an exception.

The universe seemed to tangle itself in this place we live — it’s even been called the town of aliens. Thanks to that, people treat me like an extraterrestrial. I don’t like it either, but there’s nothing I could do about it.

‘You’ve grown so much,’ is how mom might put it.

My hair, carried by the wind like a pendulum, stroked my ears. I shook a little from the tickling.

“Erio, come on in if you’re getting cold.” Mom slid the window open and spoke. I turned around startingly. S-she’s watching this entire time.

“Mom will warm you up with some cuddles. Come on in.”

She beckoned, and squeezed at an invisible me.

“Mm~ Just a little more.”

“Erio’s is already rebellious! Mm... It’s still too early. I don’t remember using an accelerant...”

Mom’s head retracted into the windows; she shut the window and rolled over to the corner of the room. Her dark, indigo hair mimicked her rolling about. I walked a few steps forward, eyes tracking her head. As mom rammed her head onto the wall, my right hand landed on the window. In the light of the living room, my blurry face appeared on the glass.

“Mm...” I imitated mom in the staff office.

I picked up the hair that's recently been cut.

"It might be a little too short..."

I cut my hair because it was difficult to move around with. But that's not what I was concerned about.

My eyes stared at the colour of the hair and eye cast on the glass.

Azure blue.

There was no one else in the school with this hair colour — It drew everyone's attention.

A lot of people who'd met me said 'you look like an alien.'

The phrase baffled me more than the colour itself.

Space isn't aqua-blue, so why do people think my eyes or hair look alien? Does such a thing exist in the human genome? Had previous humans encounter aliens before? Were those aliens emanating aquatic light? I'd like to meet them then.

But there're only humans around me.

When the time is right, though, I'll find them myself.

"If that were to case..."

The problem right now would be—

My life on this planet had recently become a little rougher.

I run to school every day.

It's essential for any aspiring astronaut, the lady at the science museum told me, to have stamina. So I ran — sprinted.

"I'm going!"

As I was on my way outside this morning, mom peeked her head out from the depth of the hallway and said something other than 'careful on your way there.'

"How about if mom gave you a ride there?"

"Okay."

Some days — usually when mom overslept — are like this.

I braked on my shoes, stepping stationarily while waiting for mom. It was a good day out: A blue day without much cloud — Tonight should be perfect for stargazing.

“I’m excited.”

“Seriously, you’re too excited on a weekday, Eri.”

As I began standing on my toes periodically, mom yelled at me. It’s not the kind of anger that I should feel bad for though.

Mom dragged the bicycle out of the shed. On days when I go to friends’ houses or whatever, I change the bike’s seat height and use it too.

The coloured bicycle named **Legend Colour** was the birthday present I asked for last year. I heard astronauts need to speak English fluently too, so for the sake of my **English** I speak it often now.

Mom straddled onto the seat before handing me the yellow helmet inside the basket. The school mandates all students to wear them when biking, not that anyone really listens. Still, I couldn’t just say no when my mom handed it to me.

I quietly put on the oversized helmet and adjusted the strap. Mm... If it could cover my hair, then it should be perfect. I recalled the fight; I thought how uncomfortable sitting quietly was. Pain rippled from my cheek when I went to scratch it. Oh yeah, I got hurt on my face. The bandaid must be stuck on my pillow after I rolled over last night.

I let my backpack into the basket and sat down on the rack behind mom; my arms reached around her stomach. She’s has a very slim waist. I have to say that everytime. We kids have it rough too.

“Where to, dear customer?”



'Where to, dear customer?

Before we head out, mom jokingly asked with her foot on the pedal.

"Mm~" I contemplated on a cool or funny line, but nothing came to mind. I would totally hop into the basket and yell 'I wanna fly!' but I couldn't stand the embarrassment.

The basket isn't a place for a human.

"Uu~ Uu~ Uu~"

I pondered so hard that I even groaned.

"Mind if you leave it to me, dear customer?"

"Mm..."

Not only did she play taxi, Mom also played boatman. I felt like I was the king of all transports.

She began moving; our bicycle gradually accelerated. The wheels played out a light tune.

"Ahh~ The weather's so nice. I wanna travel somewhere instead of working."

Mom looked around, her eyes squinting from the sun.

"Didn't we just go?"

We had a five-days break two weeks ago, and we went to a sea-side hotel. That was the end of September, and mom insisted on going to swim in the sea. After about three minutes of free-styling she crawled back up, freezing.

'The sea is a demon' escaped from her clattering teeth.

"Meme-chan loves traveling, so of course I'd go when I have the chance to."

Lulala~ Lula~ Lalala! Lulu~La~La~ La~ She sang. What's amazing about mom is her ability to not care about what the neighbours we passed think. She's so cool. I don't really get what she's saying though, but I guess that's what you call 'grown-up talk.'

I rubbed mom's back with the cheek that's not scratched. Though I felt only the clothe from her back, I felt that no matter how hard I press onto her back,

she would always hold me up. I was overjoyed.

“Eri, where do you want to go?”

Mom, stopping her song halfway, asked while turning the bicycle right, away from where she works.

“But Mr. Money went away, so I guess we can’t go anywhere for a while... Hehehe.... Ahem...”

“Mm?” I wasn’t thinking about something clever this time.

I had a place in mind, but I hesitated to say it.

And I too wondered if I could even go there.

“Space.”

“What~ There’s no hot spring there.”

Mom pouted disappointedly. Looks like she wants to go to a hot spring this time. I could easily imagine my mom swimming in the bath when no one else is around.

After the right turn, the straightway connects to the main road. It’s a real road where cars drive on, not like the one in front of my house that only has bicycles. It’s hard to picture the two streets being connected.

The main road is where elementary school kids, middle schoolers and high schoolers could see each other. It’s a convenient road, but apparently a lot of car accidents happen here. The teachers occasionally put out notices for us to be careful.

This was actually not the way I take to school, but it’s fine since mom is with me.

“Erio.”

As we sped past the cross walk when the light began flashing, mom spoke to me.

“Mm?”

“Are you going to fight again today?”

I paused my fussing. As if silently confirming the voice from mom, I put my ear onto her back.

She must have personally brought me to school because she wanted to talk about this.

“If you’re gonna fight, leave it to after school. Mom will help.”

She cheerfully declared, and rang the bicycle bell. No one was in front of us.

“Mm...”

We passed the sidewalk; I didn’t know how to respond, so I let out an ambivalent moan.

“Heheh, how could any grade schooler survive Meme-chan’s straights?”

“Tokiwa-san from sixth grade apparently is over 170cm.”^[15]

“Still not a problem!”

She let go of the handlebars, reaching both hands forward. You’re not fighting anyone and please stop shaking it’s really scary.

I am in fifth grade. It’s a bit embarrassing as an older student because of my frequent scuffles: It’s not like I enjoyed fighting.

We passed a few people I know on the main road. After meeting eyes, my lips curled up a bit. They waved at me when they saw.

Most people didn’t cause trouble.

Only a few earthlings made fun of me in class.

“.....”

Sometimes mom says outlandish things.

But she’s absolutely a human.

So I am too, I think.

And who knows about dad.

I belonged in class three of the fifth grade, in the room of the deepest part of third floor. We had two buildings in the campus; the one closer to the school gate was for first and second year. I went there two years ago; faculty room and

infirmary were also situated there.

Mom and I said bye at the gate. I promised that I won't fight today; I told myself that I must follow it through. I took a deep breath and charged into the building. After changing shoes, I sprinted all the way onto the third floor! It was easy because my mom brought me here. **Take it easy.**

I ran three floors up without stopping, continuing onto the waxed hallway that people weren't supposed to run on; I found the classroom furthest inside and entered from the back door.

Few of the students who got there early stared at me; I said hi to some of my friends there. A lot of people live a bit further away from the school, so they come here earlier. Typically it's students who live right behind the school who barely arrive on time.

I walked toward the third seat from the back in the middle column — that's my seat this semester. Our arrangement was done by Gojuuon order last semester, but it was by drawing name this time.^[16]

To be honest, I didn't care where to sit. Others seemed to think otherwise though. They also liked drawing the lots too, but I guess they just wanted to hang out with their friends.

Though I had friends, I didn't really understand the appeal with having a clique.

Before sitting down, I checked out everyone else in the room. Nice, the girl that I fought with yesterday isn't here.

I set my backpack on the desk; the girl next to me reacted to the sound. She simply said 'morning.' It was weird since we didn't talk a lot, but I still said 'morning' to her awkwardly.

She's a tiny girl; her desk was massive compared to her. It's not like I was bigger than she was though. I think her name was Maekawa-san. Her eyes are kind of scary.

After saying hi, Maekawa-san went back to her book. It was probably just a polite gesture; following suit, I sat down quietly.

Hand propping my head up, I spaced out staring at the clock above the blackboard. It was only eight. We're about twenty minutes away from the hygiene committee person asking how we're doing and the teacher announcing today's schedule.

"Mm, twenty more minutes of this?"

This is terrible. I don't read books like Maekawa-san does. I looked around to find some friends to talk with, but I saw that they were already with somebody else, so I couldn't go in. To me, a friend of a friend is just a classmate.

Too bad. I lied on the desk. The morning played out by the sun seeping into the class room and the chilly air dissipated — A night all to myself.

Tip of my nose pushed against the table's grain. The disgusting smell of eraser shavings.

I wondered if I could sleep till home room begins, so I closed my eyes in anticipation to my own night.

"Zzz~ zzz~" I snored. Zzz... Zzz... "Uwah."

Twitch, my head shot up to my body jolting. I wiped my mouth thinking that there might be drool while looking around. "Oh~" A lot of people gathered.

The room that allowed even the bird's chirping to be heard was suddenly as raucous as the city. Shrill screams of prepubescent boys, and even laughter of the girls; I peeked at the clock, seeing that the long hand was pointing at 15.

It seemed that I was the only one unaware of the atmosphere, so I panicked. Maybe fifteen minutes of my memory disappeared, and the sudden change in this room scared me. It was as though I suddenly realised that I was elsewhere, or that I just leaped through time. I turned, searching for a clue.

I saw that girl that I fought with — Kashiwagi — had already arrived, chatting with her friends. At first I thought she would purposefully put a giant bandage over her head, but she didn't. Her seat was two seats ahead of mine on the left; if she were to focus in class, we won't see each other. But I had a feeling that if we did, she'd glare me down.

Even now I felt she'd suddenly turn my way and stare resentfully, so I faced

toward the hallway, away from the windows to let time pass. The girls centring Kashiwagi were the people causing my misery on this planet — these were the environment destroyers.

Their senseless harassment toward me and my life upset me. I waited for the teacher to arrive.

After a while our teacher Mr. Baldie entered the room with his usual displeased look.

Bag and handouts under his arm pits, he passed through the classroom and violently tossed all those things on his desk. A deep thud echoed from the papers and the bag.

The teacher began scanning the room from his podium, showing a stern look only when looking at me. I, too, looked back as if shooting beam from my eyes. I'm not aggressive; I just hate looking weak in front of people I hate.

He looked away disinterestedly, onto Kashiwagi this time. She cowered, and her body became almost part of the chair. Kashiwagi is just a normal kid who's afraid of the teachers, so why did she pull my hair? I thought she said my hair and eyes were gross.

The teacher finally looked away from us, back to the entire class. He then passed out the handouts while reminding us about the suspicious person appearing around town and going back home on time after school. That was it. I thought Kashiwagi and I will get called into the office, but he didn't say anything else in front of the class.

After the teacher stepped off, the hygiene committee boy went up and opened up his health survey made from cardboard. 'Anyone feeling sick~' he asked lazily while his eyes drifted toward the windows. Kashiwagi was still shrivelled up. Good.

Our first class today, P.E, would be taking place under the blue sky.

The sports festival was next Sunday, so we spent most of the time in P.E classes practicing either running or tug-of-war.

Since I trained myself every day, I took first place in the 50 metres race last year to show off to mom.

This year's glory will also be mine.

There are still merits on the difficult road of becoming an astronaut.

'Hey!' I tossed about ten balls into the basket. 'Hey!' I pulled the arm of the classmate in front of me when we're having a tug of war. After it was all over, I nodded off during second period's math from working too hard. Third period's science class was alright. Fourth period's social study I took some notes. Liver in the lunch's curry grossed me out. Worked hard during cleanup, and half the class after that I slept through.

So ended the time of being locked in the school. Since nothing important happened I'll skip a few things. An elementary school kid's day doesn't begin till after school.

Baldie didn't call me to his office, which means my grade was in serious trouble.

I promised to mom, so I didn't fight with Kashiwagi today. I could tell she's avoiding me, though. She would glare at me from far away sometimes, so she hadn't given up yet. She might be holding back while the storm passes, but I think she'll probably hold out for three days like usual.

She seemed to have chosen the beginning of second semester as reason to harass me.

I remember her not saying much before then. At most we say 'good morning' to each others at the shoe locker. But she started destroying the environment. I don't know why. She and her lackeys claimed that I was gross. They once shouted together, calling me alien and stuff. Shut up, stupid.

When they called me names, I said nothing. But when she pulled my hair, I blew up and hit her. I made a fist and smacked her head like in a questionnaire show, She was laughing when I hit her, so her teeth banged into one another, making this loud noise. She groaned, holding her chin. It wasn't my intent, but the way she was hurting made me feel bad. So I said sorry. And she just swung back at me. The nails on her hand scratched me, and all my guilt went away.

I was so mad, and by the time I realised we're already grabbing each other's clothes. When that happened, Kashiwagi's lackeys ran off, probably afraid of

being scolded. She's pretty lonely too, huh. I only have mom too.

That's what happened yesterday. I did hit her a lot more, but it is what it is. You don't count in a fight like you do in a gym.

I shoved my books and the handout from this morning into my backpack; I don't know how early I was, but I ran out. Naturally, I kicked my way through the hall. Passing the classmates walking leisurely, I jumped off the stairs. I couldn't go home like my classmates; I couldn't go to their homes either.

Because the universe is so far away.

If I relax too much, I would never make it there. After throwing my slippers into the locker, I put on my shoes and dashed off to the training ground.

The time after school was when I secretly train myself. I headed toward the main gate.

If mom was waiting outside, I'd call it a day. But she wasn't! As per my original plan, I took a right. It was , however, a little disappointing.

"Is she working hard today?"

I pondered about my mom while dashing.

My destination was the park next to the temple located near the residential district. If you ask why, it would be because my path to the aliens was there, in that dim place surrounded by trees. Oh, it's the **road** that opens to my secret base.

The park was my own: save for the old man who cleans the temple occasionally, not many comes near here. Though there were the birds, and the cicadas in the summer, and even the hobo who once lived here, they all disappeared recently.

That's a good thing. You can't let people see you train – that's what I learned from comic books.

There's also no sound in space, so it's good practice to get used to that. Silence shall become the fuel to my passion for space. I hope.

"....."

I looked upward while running. Dusk was still ways away.

Sometimes I ask myself:

Do I admire space so much because I am from there?

“No...”

It's because I am from Earth that I yearn so much for a place with no ground. If I were an alien, I shouldn't be so excited about the scenery that I'm already so used to seeing.

After about ten minutes of running, I arrived at the shrine. Since I ran all the way here from the classroom, my breath was ragged. But knowing that I used to need to rest halfway running this distance, this pleasant fatigue filled me up with a sense of accomplishment. I began walking through the park.

The park was dark from the dense woods blocking out the sun; the wind was colder here than on the outside. I then understood why the hobo would disappear shortly before winter season.

Usually I put my backpack onto the park equipment that is half a tire made to look buried underground before I start training. I do stuff like pull-ups on the rusty bar, and running circles in the park. I didn't really have a routine.

It's possible that I'd run into some unexpected emergencies in space, so instead of a manual, I'll rely on wittiness! That's probably not right, but a manual is too much trouble to make.

Just like I always do, I swiped on the surface of the yellow tyre before resting my backpack there. The old man who cleans up won't come today. 'So lazy~' I said so while leaving my stuff for a run. I don't think I've ran enough for the day.

I couldn't train yesterday because Kashiwagi provoked me. I have to make up for that today. “Mm...?” As I began running, something caught by the lower corner of my eye stopped me in track.

Pitter, patter, I made my way to the jungle gym where I spotted that thing. Sticking my neck in to see the structure composed for light-green iron bars, I realised that my sight was right.

An old guy was sleeping in the jungle gym with a cat.

“.....”

The cat lied peacefully on the old guy's stomach; the old guy rested between the cracks in the jungle gym with a slightly pained expression. He didn't seem to want to move.

Then why not just sleep somewhere else. Then I thought that maybe this old guy had a reason. Could this be his house? There's no blanket or a bedroom, so I don't want to live there. Ah, he woke up. He opened his eyes lazily.

My presence seemed to have woke him up; with bleary eyes he looked at me.

“Oh... Hi there, kiddo.”

Mm... He greeted me roughly. Confirmed that he's a human.

“Hello, old guy.”

Mom praised me last time for being polite, so I said hi back. The old guy didn't seem so impressed, pouting.

“At least call me mister. Same syllables too.”

“Mister old guy.”

“That's not the same kind of polite.”

“It's just a few more syllables, don't let it bother you.”

“What a mouthy kid.”

The old guy smiled happily after saying so. Still, he remained with the cat.

He rubbed his tired eyes and yawned. The old guy was skinny, and for a hobo (I think) he's pretty clean. His clothes were not tattered, and they were of better taste than Mr. Baldie's. Is he new to the hobo business?

“Ah. Are you a bad person, old guy?”

I thought of what the teacher said this morning and asked him outright.

The old guy who'd been accused as a bad person frowned. ‘Hm.’ He appeared to contemplate on an answer. I have the same expression when I get called up to solve a hard math question.

“I guess? I don't really know either, since there is a lot of bad people.”

“A bad person just said something that made sense.”

“So are you going to just chat away with a bad person?”

The old man with ‘things he had no right to say, part 2’ asked.

Mm! Yep. Even mom would be angry if I talk with some strange man. But I can’t really care for some old guy in my secret training facility, so it’s okay if it’s a little dangerous.

“Since you’re lying down in there, I’ll just run when you try to get out.”

My legs are very fast. If I lose to some middle aged old man like him, don’t even mention space, I’d have trouble leaving Japan.

“As long as you don’t come out, I am safe when I speak with you.”

“What am I, Gulliver?”^[17]

The old guy grimaced wryly. Perhaps in sync with his chuckles, the cat got up. It was a yellow and slightly chubby cat; it didn’t seem feral. The way it slept with its belly up gave a sense of leisure that contradicts the old man’s.

“Is this where you play, the park? I’ll leave if you want.”

The old guy stuck in the bars (sounds like a picture book’s name) looked up toward the thick forest while asking me. Now’s a good time for me to claim ownership.

“Yeah, this is where I train.”

“Train? That’s amazing. Sounds nice.”

The old guy laughed. Hahaha, the cat slipped off from his belly onto the ground. Upset that it had to stand on its feet, the cat meowed resentfully. It looked up to me.

I traded glance with the cat, discovering its trait – its eyes had no light, like those of the wrapped-up fishes in the super market. Staring at those eyes, I thought I might think of cats as not creatures, but created.

“Old guy, is this your cat?”

I just had to ask amidst the talk of training and exclusive rights. ‘Hm?’ He looked at the thing he hugged; after confirming where the cat was, a smile

formed on his face, 'oh.'

"Am I feeding this cat, or is this cat feeding me?"

"Mm?" I don't understand abstract things.

"This guy helps me find food. It's been a godsend."

The old man tried to pat the cat, but it didn't want any of it and ran outside the tower. It was nimble despite being fat.

Seeing the cat run off, he chuckled; his gaze moved toward me.

"Training... aside. Are you in grade school?"

"Yes. I'm in fifth grade."

I opened my palm, showing five fingers.

"Really. Kids nowadays sure have some interesting hair colour."

"Wu..."

Of course he saw that. I've never seen anyone with hair colour like mine though.

Mom said that my dad and I share the same hair. They call it genetic inheritance.

"Is your hair real?" He pushed on mercilessly.

Facing with this seemingly slow and nice man, I couldn't put up a menacing front.

"Mm... People always say I look like an alien."

"I could see where they're coming from."

He casually agreed. Couldn't you tell from my expression? As I lamented, the old guy's smile faded away like waves after the tide.

Then he said something that, never mind an old guy in a jungle gym, a regular old guy would never say.

"But there aren't any aliens out there as cute as you."

From his perspective, it's probably something little more than a joke.

But his words were enough to intrigue me.

Mindlessly I kneeled to speak with the old guy.

“Mister, what do you know of the universe? Have you been there? Seen the aliens?”

Perhaps afraid of my overwhelming interest in space, the old guy shrivelled up. But then a smug look appeared, and he baited so:

“About that... I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

With that, he laughed contently. That’s no different than the boys in my class bragging about catching a rare monster in their games.

“You are trying to trick me!”

Why does an old guy who’d seen space live inside this jungle gym?!

“Hold on, I’m not... I did go there before.”

He sounded so casual that it sounded like the truth. There wouldn’t be a point had he lied anyway. Deceiving a grade schooler like me when we just met wouldn’t do much.

“Really?”

I still don’t believe him. Kids nowadays have to be more cautious or we won’t survive in this harsh environment. But the moment I started talking to this man I already put myself in a lot of danger.

“Yeah. Just once though.”

He claimed; there’s a distant look in his eyes, yet the corner of his lips raised.

“Are you an astronaut?”

“No, no way I was someone so impressive. I... That’s right, I...”

Enough with the emphasis. It’s space. Space. Space! He went to space. I guess even people like him exist in this town. A few red dots appeared in my mind, but no line connected them. That’s too bad. The cats darting around near the edge of my vision did not serve to calm me down.

“Astronauts do what they do out of passion. I spent hard cold cash to get

there. It was great.”

The old guy sounded derisive, contradicting whatever he showed outwardly. But I haven’t sorted my own feelings and all this information — all he did was confuse me even more.

Besides, though not apparent, he just didn’t seem overall too excited talking about space.

“So why are you lying here?”

If you loved space, you wouldn’t be doing this. I thought. Maybe he likes Earth a lot more.

The cat seemed to agree; after meowing, it beckoned the old man.

“Well, that’s because...”

The old guy ceased talking as though glossing over. Whatever came after was anything but that.

“It’s over.”

“What is?”

Instead of answering me, he merely smiled.

But even that expression disappeared right away.

“By the time I got there, my life was already over. I got what I wanted.”

He said, all the while staring at the trees through the slits between the iron bars, perhaps regretting over something in space.

Affected by him, I peered at the ceiling of this Earth.

The sky was blue, and still covered by a limited ‘Earth.’

I stared at the black screen of a television. It’s not that I found a channel with no feed: This T.V simply could not receive signals. A tiny sound emitted from the T.V set. It sounded like it was getting a signal from space. It was so cool that I listened for a while.

After meeting the old man, I came home and stared at the T.V.

I wanted to listen to his story about space, but he left with the cat saying it’s

time for dinner. It's like he just ran off. I had thought of following him, but mom would be worried if I went and hung out with a strange man, so I went home. And it's not like I totally trusted this guy, so I kept my guard up. In any case, it's been a while since I last skipped out on two days of training.

“.....”

My ears perked. A sound much quieter than what the T.V volume was set to transmitted. A woman spoke. It could be news from another channel, but hearing it come from a pitch-black screen always felt a little more mysterious. It was soothing.

The old guy lying in the jungle gym remained in my vision. He seemed so far away, and so surreal. It made me feel that the space that I aimed for everyday when I run is right next to me.

To me, he's the being known as an alien. He came down, to the city where I live... Even though he looked nothing special, it was still exhilarating to me.

Could it be just a coincidence that this man appeared in the town protected by the extraterrestrials?

I wanted to see him again, to hear him speak more about space. Will he be there in the playground tomorrow?

Besides...

He said that people like me don't exist in space, and that made me happy. Somebody's who had been there said that to me.

I am from this planet, after all. Stupid Kashiwagi.

“I~~ AM~~ HOME~~!”

Mom's shouting followed the slam of the door; I walked out into the hall. Kicking her shoes off, mom had on her usual smile.

“Your mom was caught hiding in the comic store! I had to work really hard today! Yay~! Oh, and it's gonna rain tomorrow!”

Mom waved her hands like she was asking for complements while running toward me. She then yelled, ‘hey!’ pouncing me. Before she could reach me, she tripped. Her forehead crashed into the floor, and mom ceased moving.

Lying there, she did not budge.

“Are... Are you okay?”

“I’m okay!”

“Uwah!”

She got me. Mom’s arms wrapped around me tightly, flailing me about. Though her head flushed with redness, she didn’t seem pained at all.

“Eri~ Gimme some sugar~:

She kissed my cheeks multiple time and even sucked on my face.

“W-what are you doing? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!”

Mom, possibly perfectly fine, did not waver.

Her confidence is also why she’s so cool, I thought.

Something unexpected occurred on the following day. Kashiwagi made her move.

I sprinted all the way from my house to school that morning, and made it there five minutes later than the day before. Like yesterday there was hardly anyone there, but the people were different. That made me sad. Today was a gloomy day too, so I won’t see the stars tonight either. Mom’s weather forecast was never to be dismissed.

Kashiwagi was there. The moment I walked in she stood up and came over. Her group of disloyal friends weren’t there, but I sensed troubles brooding.

I did not stop; in fact I tried my best not to while making way to my own seat. Kashiwagi refused to let this slide. ‘Hey! Alien!’ She spoke crudely. I’m a human, so I didn’t care. She ended up pulling my hair; I turned.

She just doesn’t learn. As I spun around, I swung my hand back. My hand landed on her neck. Smack! The crispy sound of a clean hit on her neck drew the attention of everyone in the class.

“Ow!” Kashiwagi’s shrill cry of pain ensued her loosened grip on my hair. She felt her neck. Looking at her, I felt glad that I didn’t promise mom to not fight

today.

“What?”

As funny as it was hitting her first, I asked anyway. Kashiwagi’s eyes lit up, perhaps displeased with being hit. Her eyes were already slender; her mouth crooked to the side, making her look extra creepy. It wasn’t a cute look. Also since I had my hand on her so many times, I knew how oddly shaped her skull was. Kind of like a potato.

“Go back to your space, alien! Stay away from here!”

“No. Go away, Kashiwagi. You want the teacher to make you cry again?”

I shooed with my hand. I was already used to being called an alien every time by her. It’s not something I like to hear, but it doesn’t anger me anymore.

“I didn’t cry! Stupid!”

She retaliated with a cantankerous look. Being so impulsive, she’s easily provoked. It’s not like I was picking a fight, but I hated how she does exactly that every time. Time to end this quickly.

“But I saw you cry.”

I tauntingly pointed out the fact; Kashiwagi turned red. She was on the verge of breaking down, but judging by how irritated she was, I guess she did end up bawling when her mom yelled at her at home. Kashiwagi made her move.

My elbow met Kashiwagi’s hand, which reached for my hair. What should be my next move on her defenceless body? Not going to lie, I’ve never lost once in a fight with Kashiwagi. Still, I never felt like I’ve truly won. The thought stopped me short of hitting her, so I instead pinched her lips and twist it like a water faucet knob.

“Baw! Baw! Baw!”

It would appear she’s screaming ‘ow,’ but she was out of breath. Noticing the changes in her groan, I let her lips free. Kashiwagi held her mouth, her body bent forward; Kashiwagi, taller than I was, suddenly turned into a midget. She might still be taller than Maekawa-san though.

Though not teary, she glared with blood-shot eyes. Because of the pinching, it

looked like it was her nose that got punched. I felt guilty, feeling like I was the bad guy.

She backed away; I thought she'd run out to the hallway, but she merely escaped to her own seat. Aside from her lips, her right hand that was pushed away seemed to be hurt, too; she pressed onto her lips with her left.

"Stupid alien, die!"

"Okay, jeez."

I returned to my spot after leaving something for her to chew on. Hanging my backpack onto the side of the table, I looked to see others' reactions. A few of the people standing around talking met my eyes, but only shortly before averting their gaze unnaturally. They looked to Kashiwagi, with an almost sympathetic look, as opposed to the terrified look to me.

Wouldn't it be the other way around usually?

"Jeez!"

Why do I have to be in a fight this early in the day and feel like I was bullying her?

I went to the playground straight after school. Usually it's for training purposes, but not today. I slacked off for two days, so I was initially going to train properly too, but this time, it's just a convenient cause.

I wanted to meet that old guy in the jungle gym. While thinking about little things like how suspicious 'old guy at the jungle gym' sounded, I flew through the way.

The backpack's strap met the risings of my body, sinking into my shoulders. We had arts and craft for second period today, so there weren't a lot of books; however, the paint for the canvas made the pack heavier. I noticed my centre of gravity was leaning right, but I paid it no mind on the way to the playground.

If I don't hurry up, the old guy might leave to look for food with the cat. Because of an unexpected event, I left late.

I had to escape the Kashiwagi gang. I don't know how Kashiwagi, someone who lacks so much loyalty and cooperation, could possibly convince her lackeys,

but they ambushed me to try and gang up on me.

Doing something so lowly after I commended her, how useless is this Kashiwagi. To avoid her net, I circled about in the school. First, I lost Kashiwagi in the classroom; I then saw Underling A camping out in the hallway (Class mate. Has long face). I gripped her hand, but before she could let an attack out, I crushed her right hand. Once the pained wailing began, I escaped easily. As I ran in the hallway, students from other classrooms swarmed; I was ahead of the crowd. And then, I discovered Underling B (pale girl) waiting in front of the staircase.

With my fist clenched, I raised my arm while sprinting. Underling B immediately covered her face in a stance of non-aggression. Using the opening I jumped down the flight of stairs. Why are you helping a fight if you don't want to get hit? Well, I don't like being hit either. I hate Kashiwagi.

There's not a single cute girl in Kashiwagi's gang. It's like a bowl of potatoes in an iron pan.

I hurried down the last stairs; as I began panting, Kashiwagi appeared.

A four-on-one wouldn't be good to me; I had to avoid the shoe lockers and make my way to the hallway connecting to the other building. What a pain, at some point the thought formulated.

I made my way out of the first-year's building; it would be a lot easier if I could run barefooted, but I didn't want mom to be worried. It wouldn't be good. I had to rely on our differences in stamina and speed to spread them out, then defeat them individually. That's the kind of trouble I had to deal with. I felt that I had to thank my skipping out on trainings for my nimbleness.

"That's what happened!"

"You kids sure are lively."

The old guy had on a homesick smile on his face after hearing my animated story.

He's still in the jungle gym today, but he wasn't lying down this time: Limbs twisted, he was like the thing inside a tooth paste tube, sitting down in the spaces between the bars with his arms and legs through them.

He looked like a puppet tied up by its own strings. Gross. I expected no less from the old guy.

The cat curled outside the gym, trying to catch its own tail. It turned lazily on its back.

My mom looks like that on weekends.

"It's too much. I'm not a radical."

The old guy laughed my rant off.

"Maybe they're just jealous of your look."

"Oh? Really? Am I cute?"

"I don't usually look at kids face that much, but I guess you're pretty good."

"Thanks."

I rarely looked at my face, because of the hair and eyes.

So that's why Kashiwagi wants me to die so badly. She's really hitting that puberty.

"Oh well, I don't care about Kashiwagi. Tell me more about space, old guy."

This is what I escaped Kashiwagi's company for. Say it. Tell me about space, old guy.

"Well... What do you want me to talk about?"

"Like, the universe is like this! Or it's so big! You know."

My arms flew out, anticipating the many things he'd tell me. Perhaps he found it amusing; his shoulders shook from the chuckling.

"What? Old guy, were you really lying about going to space?"

"No, that's not it. I just thought of myself ten years ago: I was just like you."

He laughed, twitching in there. Of course it's tight on space in there. The cat came out first.

Smart cat. I knelt to greet the cat, but it didn't even bat an eye. It seemed absorbed in its tail.

“Ten years ago... That’d make you a young old guy?”

“Wow, don’t kids nowadays not know what ‘young man’ means? I *ami* a young old guy. I was a young man who was too old for anything, and basically useless.”

He had a nostalgic look; it’s befitting of people his age, but even mom sometimes have this look when she spaces out looking at the yard. I may be a kid, but I knew she’s either thinking about dad or Oba-chan.

“I don’t get it. You’re too abstract, old guy.”

“You’ll get it in twenty years.”

“Just make it so I can understand it now!”

The old guy posed like a mannequin left in a garbage dump laughed, ‘what an honest kid.’ So gross. I personally wanted to kick him in the stomach to straighten him up, so he’d look like a flower in a vase. Since I hadn’t heard anything about space yet, I held it in. If all this about going to space was a lie though, I will definitely do it.

“I wasn’t this into space when I was your age. It was after I turned thirty.”

“How old are you, old guy?”

“Forty two.”

“Four two.”^[18]

“Shut up. It’s basically impossible to become an astronaut at that age.”

The old guy put his hands up in surrender, but because of the iron bars, he could only stretch in other directions. ‘Ugh,’ he groaned. Again the bars made him go elsewhere... After another minute, he settled down. Throughout the minute, the cat had grown tired of its tail and began strolling in the playground. He didn’t stop the cat.

“It’s impossible to start working out and relearn my English at that point. Impossible, really. Besides, there weren’t even that many Japanese astronaut then, so I didn’t think I could become an astronaut.”

“So how did you get there?”

“With this.”

The old guy had his palm up and made a circle with his thumb and index finger. I thought with my head tilted, ‘A monk or Jizouposatsu?’ ‘Money,’ the old man said. [\[19\]](#)

“I spent a lot of money to have a trip to space. If there’s something I had, it was money. Doing jobs that had nothing to do with space, I crawled around this earth to make some money.”

His creepy laughter resonated in the park. The old guy then looked upward, toward the ceiling-like trees that no birds would fly out from.

“But space travel scam was a big thing back then... Before I could find the real thing, I used up almost all my money. I did end up in space thought.

‘I was exhilarated,’ he whispered as though he was ruminating the taste of his favourite dish. I was envious of people like this old guy. We couldn’t afford anything like that in my house. I’ve never seen mom win a lottery, so it was my only choice to become an astronaut.

Thinking that, I became more spirited. I wanted to run as much as I could, but the old guy wasn’t done. Too bad. I wish my torso could stay here while my legs do something else. That way I could listen and train at the same time.

“I invested all my wealth and got into a rocket for three... No, two and half minutes. In that amount of time, I experienced a zero-g world. I was too nervous though; I couldn’t enjoy it as much as I should have.”

“Two and a half minutes... Wow... Zero-g is so cool...”

“Wahahah, be more jealous.”

He’s obviously proud. This sucks. If an old guy who doesn’t even have a house outside of this jungle gym could go to space, then mom and I should be able to go there easily since we have a house.

But this old guy looked penny-less, so once I thought of going to space regardless, I was no longer frustrated.

“But why did you go to space?”

“Hm?”

The old guy raised his head off the iron bar. I looked at him, then the cat. He squinted; his eyes were a lot smaller than when he smiles.

“Because I thought once I go there, my life would be over.”

“What?”

“I went to space, and that was my life-long goal. I believed that my life would then end at that point. In fact, it would be great if life were to end upon achieving that something. There’s no more game after winning the Koshien championship. It should end there.”

The old guy described himself in a passionate way unfitting for October. I couldn’t comprehend his abstract speech, but I knew it was about ‘ending.’

“Once I got there, I felt a change— actually, something did change, and it was the peak of my life. It’s all over, but my life wasn’t. I lost everything and came back here. Strange, I thought, when I stepped onto the ground after getting out of the rocket.”

“.....”

“And now, ten years after that, I’m still alive on this Earth. Strange.”

Like tears were falling out of his eyes, his voice trembled as if crying. The old guy was merely looking skyward, trapped in the jungle gym. It was as though he was amazed with how here he is, alive on Earth.

“Don’t you want to come back here?”

“Mm?”

I thought the scratch on my face iteche; I covered my cheek.

“Do you want to become an alien after you go there?”

“I don’t know... That doesn’t sound so bad though. It’s okay even if I’m not a human. I just want it to...”

‘End like that.’ After saying so, the old guy shut his eyes and let his body limp. It might look as if he would never wake up, but I somehow knew that he will open his eyes again, seconds, minutes or even hours later.

He’s already been to where he wanted to be, so here he is, waiting for his life

to end.

“Oh? You’re in the scavenger hunt, Erio?”

“Yep.”

“Leave it to your beautiful sister. Oh, I can help if you want to borrow a cute girl. Or a beautiful girl, too. Anything that has anything to do with beautiful or ‘beauty,’ you just come hit Meme-chan up.”

“Mom is so cool~”

Several hours after meeting with the old guy. By the time the sun had set, I was chatting happily with mom about the sports festival over dinner. Primarily it was mom who’s happy.

We decided on what everyone was doing in the sports meet during homeroom today. I was going to join the scavenger hunt. An endurance race that I would shine in wasn’t part of the meet. There were two people who were faster than I since I became a fifth grader, so I couldn’t join the fifty-meter race anymore.

And so I, who’s considered as fairly fast, would be joining a peculiar activity amongst the racing category. Since it’s a game that’s heavily dependent on luck, so it’s hard to say if I could show off in front of mom. This sucks.

I stabbed at the potato-meat stew mom made. How did she make this when she’s at work? Mm~ Weird.

“.....”

Like the potato I picked up, covered in onion and pork.

My mind was in a jumble. Mostly because of that old guy.

Space is great, naturally same goes for the people who went there. But the old guy, lying inside that iron gym, made it all sound like a failure,.

It’s odd. What *is* going to space? The question threw me into disarray.

“.....”

That old guy can’t be a good person if he could just go ahead and ruin a kid’s dream.

“Erio?” Mom called. She noticed my chopsticks stopping. ‘It’s delicious,’ I added.

Her smile faded; she looked into my aquatic eyes. Mom’s colour was between black and violet, different from mine.

“Were you in a fight?”

“No.”

It was one-sided, so it wasn’t a fight.

“Oh yeah. The school said something about a weird guy, so I’ll be careful.”

I changed the topic stiffly. Mom opened her mouth, wanting to talk about the fight. Still, she waved her chopsticks like a baton, and the smile emerged from her face again.

“The newbie at my store said she saw some weird old guy.”

“Okay...” So that’s where the old guy and his cat went.

“While Meme-chan was doing her best making potato stew.”

Oh, so she cooked it in the store. I remember her saying that there’s nothing for her to do even if she went there. I guess’s mom never wastes time... Wait?

“If some weird guy talks to you, never go with him. Eri is too cute. If I was an old guy I’d pick you too.”

Where did that confidence come from, especially the latter part?

“I’ll pick you now, too!”

“Wagh!”

Mom went around the table and lunged at me. Even though we’re in the middle of supper, mom and I screamed while rolling around the floor. “Wagh!” It’s just like jumping into a pool right after a big meal. We tossed about and even hit the wall and the door. Mostly just mom though.

“Oww! But I will protect Eri!” Said mom coolly.

“That’s my line!”

My entirety still spun like I was thrown into a blender. Mom’s embrace was

still a lot better than the jungle gym though.

“Eri, you can sleep with me today!”

“Ah~ah~”

I thought while spinning in the house with centrifugal force.

The whole thing with Kashiwagi is miniscule compared to traveling to space. And I’ve the difficulty of going to space. Like the old guy when he’s young, I yearned for space.

I never considered what might come afterward.

What is the universe, to an Earthling like me?

It would seem that it isn’t enough to just have astronaut as my goal if I want to overcome hardships.

Rather sentimentally, I realised that I am no different than a regular human from this point of view.

Two days passed. It’s now Friday. My life wasn’t any different during that time.

Kashiwagi was there too during school on weekdays. Since I beat the crap out of her, she did not come directly to provoke me. At most she loudly discussed aliens with her friends in class when she’s a bit away in class, sitting in her seat. She’d then end it with ‘aliens should just die.’ That did nothing to me though. It’s the usual elementary school life.

My afterschool time, however, had been different since four days ago. The old guy was always in the jungle gym with his cat. He’s always trapped in there, while the cat dawdled around the playground. Sometimes it chased its tail. How peaceful.

Even when I asked the old guy about space, he’d always brush me off, ‘there’s nothing more to say.’ If he’d nothing to do with space, he meant nothing to me. So I never talked with him about anything that’s not space-related, and continued with my training at the playground. Sometimes I go for the cat. It’s very nimble.

Three days passed without much.

We had to prepare for the sports meet during third period today. Setting up tents, drawing lines on the field etc were not necessary till the day before the event next week, but there were still a lot to do. For examples, making the pamphlet for the sports schedule and preparing the props for the games.

My team was told to make the list for the scavenger hunt. First we cut papers into the size of rectangle slips, then we write items' name on them. That was our job.

'Is it really okay for contestants to make these?' I pondered as my marker froze in the air. What should I put down?

Whoever is responsible for the slips can write anything, but this depends highly on his or her wisdom as well. Everyone cut out the required amount of paper first before stopping to wonder, or to discuss with his or her friends. What are some interesting yet challenging things? Or something that could be easily lent like glasses or hats? The teachers did not tell us the procedures.

What I'd wrote so far were still boring things like 'dog,' 'cup,' and 'red balloon.' I thought of astronomy telescope, but no one could find one. And if I draw this one, I will definitely end up in the last place in front of mom.

"This is hard."

After muttering so, I tipped my chair backward. The front of my chair was off the ground, with only the back wobbling back and forth. I watched the clamorous classroom while maintaining balance.

I ended up making eye contact with Kashiwagi, who's responsible for making the flower decoration on the sports meet entrance. Was she staring at me the entire time if we saw each other so easily? She smiled maliciously while looking. It's a scheming expression, but most likely she'd rather come at me directly, so it's probably nothing more than just that. That was just her default state.

She could stick her tongue out at me, or have on an obviously contemptible look, but she would always just look away with that annoying smile. I don't know which is which anymore. When does our fight stop?

She's always like that, so I don't know. What do I do?

"A closure, huh..."

The words of that old guy still dangled in my mind.

He was looking for a closure. Same as I with Kashiwagi.

For example, pushing her off the window... That'd would end the fights.

But if that were to happen, I would then have to live like the old guy. It's too fast, and thus too empty — I'd end up like him.

It will be like only holding down the tips of a spring. If that happens, I will have to stay an uncertain human like the old guy. That's not why I want to end the fights.

Will I keep arguing with Kashiwagi? That's not right either.

I'm not saying I will drag this on. Not everything could be ended by just insisting that I'm a human and not an alien. Then do I ask myself, or the old guy, about what to do? Neither of us will have a good answer.

If this keeps up, I will solve neither space, Kashiwagi, nor the scavenger hunt.

Will I end up like the old guy if I rushed things? Having to do what you hate might just mean you have to carry that weight forever. Whether it's doing what I like or hate, either way will be failure.

Does that mean that life tastes better if it's stewed slowly to perfection?

"Mm... Don't get it."

I rest the chair back down, all while holding down the remaining paper slips. Head on my palms, I stared blankly at the others. I expected someone to be done by now.

Naturally, no one did. The other students were already talking amongst themselves, despite it being halfway through class. Mr. Baldie said nothing, sitting in his corner grading some tests. He's younger than the old guy, but if it were him sitting in that jungle gym I'd lose all respect for him.

The old guy seemed to have lost much after going to space.

He must be in pain because he couldn't find closure for all the things he'd lost.

"....."

I came to a conclusion after much thought.

It had nothing to do with being an astronaut or spending money on a trip.

Time and motivations were the issue.

I think that's why he didn't sense closure.

"Old guy, when did you start squatting here?"

I left and went to the playground behind the shrine. My classmates who were told to stay behind because we couldn't finish making the props in an hour probably wasn't too pleased.

Does the old man who come and clean the shrine never see him? The rumour of here having a strange guy had not spread in town yet. And I don't want people to find out where I train, so that's fine.

"Mm? I think it's about time. Staying too long in one place is usually leads to problems... The weather's changing too so I have to go down south."

His words carried little weight — like light paint in words. I could tell that that wasn't why. He seems to be someone who pretends to have seen it all. He lied in the jungle gym again today. Doesn't that hurt?

"Weren't you born here?"

Because he knows space. But this town knows space too.

"Nope. I came from a town deep in the mountains."

"Oh... The cat too?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah, he went to space with me too. It was kind of like an experiment."

"Really?"

I held the cat up with both hands. Kinda heavy. Perhaps because it disliked its feet leaving ground, it struggled momentarily. So this cat's has more space experience than I do. 'Mm~' What is this sense of defeat?

"Is there still space-travel now...? What if it was all a dream?"

Saying so, the old guy smiled emptily, like a girl who'd just been dumped. It's

not a particularly attractive face for an old guy.

“Old guy, I’m a little worried about going to space now after what you said.”

I asserted my displeasure from the side; the old guy put away his kind-of ugly smile.

“Oh? Why?”

“I don’t wanna end up like you if I ever go to space.”

I said so earnestly after resting the cat down. ‘Ah,’ the old guy avoided my eyes in embarrassment without ceasing his words.

“Maybe I was just having an unreal expectation for space. You shouldn’t listen to me.”

“But...”

“It’s a far, far away place that you couldn’t touch by conventional methods. If you are lost, you’re never gonna get there, kiddo.”

The old guy half-jokingly cheered me on. He’s right. Any more than this and the problem won’t be about whether or not I’d go to space.

“Do you believe in aliens, old guy?”

I changed topic. ‘Hmm~’ he groaned, his eyes trailing the passing birds.

“It’s dreamier to say they do. But I guess it’d be hard for them to exist in reality.”

“What if I were to say my dad is an alien?”

“Would an alien be so interested in space like you?”

He’s right, but what he said afterward almost had me saying something.

“Contrastingly, wouldn’t an alien feel confused or intrigued by life on Earth, too?”

‘Like you now, old guy?’ I retracted those words and kneeled down, troubled.

What is defined as an alien? If they’re from space? Or if they went to space? Then would the old guy be considered as an alien? Then, are all astronauts aliens?

Why would I, who'd never been to space, be called an Earthling?

Not even the old guy could answer these questions, I bet. It's something that only the person herself could decide. Being called an alien probably only sounds so bad because Kashiwagi treats me as someone different.

"Uwah..."

Both the old guy and I pondered. Whenever you feel like this, the best thing to do is to run as fast as you could in a big place; but if you're just running, all you'd get is fatigue.

Luckily, I know of a place where I could run as much as I want. It's somewhere I will be in the near future.

"Mm..."

He can't run there, but he could see someone else run there.

And...

The person closest to being an 'alien' was this old guy.

"We have a sports festival next Sunday... Would you like to come?"

"What?"

He raised his head. Like tossing a letter into a mail box, I passed the festival pamphlet to him through the iron pipes.

It's for me and mom. The pamphlet meant for students and parents was being given to the old guy. He didn't take it right away, merely tilting his head.

"Why me?"

"To thank you for your space stories."

There's something more to what I said, I think. It's a vague reason; something that is indescribable.

The old guy scratched his head; he took the papers casually and flipped through the content. 'Oh~ This school, huh,' he noted.

"You just said I was ruining your dreams, and here you are thanking me."

"Don't mind the detail. If you're not coming, give the pamphlet back."

My arm remained in the jungle gym. ‘Ah~ Hm...’ The old guy struggled with the response. He raised his entire body; he nimbly navigated through the pipes with just his torso. Picking up the pamphlet, he stroked his goatee.

“I’m not married or anything, but is this what it feels like to be invited by your kid to a sports festival?”

“I don’t know.”

I’ve never invited my dad either.

“If I’m free... Which I always am. I’ll go if I want to go.”

“Okay.”

I nodded; the old guy more intently, but he went back to being limp.

There was another reason why I invited him, but it’s a secret.

The sports festival was held on an October Sunday that had little to do with Health and Sports Day.^[20]

‘It used to be held on weekdays. Time’s changed,’ mom said. It’s always been either a Saturday or a Sunday since I was in kindergarten, so I’m not sure about before.

I showed mom the pamphlet on the morning of the event. ‘I’ll show up before scavenger hunt starts in the afternoon,’ she said prior to leaving for work. She moaned about not having Sundays off since she’s working in a store, but she’s also complaining about something. She also takes days-off at weird times. Mom will always be a mysterious person no matter how old I get. I like mysterious.

The sky was grey, with a possible chance of sunshine in the afternoon. Since it’s easier to move around when it’s cloudy, I prayed that it will be like this till the event’s over. Though I’m the only one for scavenger hunt, I had to join for other team competitions as well. Every grade level had Team Rally and Tug-of-war.

I only have Tug-of-war in the morning. I can’t pull very well, so I’m glad that mom will see me for scavenger hunt and rally.

It’s been a year since I last wore P.E uniform to school. I saw many others like me on the way to school. A lot of them carried their water bottles on their

shoulders. The water jar dangled along my light steps. I'm like an athlete who gets pumped up for sports meets, except I'm not an athlete.

I sat my bag down first thing arriving at the school. Students would typically take their own chairs along with the pamphlet to the field. I already gave mine to the old guy, so I had only the chair. I wondered about carrying the water bottle, but, since it's cloudy out, decided to leave it there... Mm, wait. What if Kashiwagi or someone destroys my lunch? I don't think she's quite that low (she's never made a move on my books or backpack), but maybe her friends would... But it's probably fine...

As usual, I reached the classroom early; there were more people in there than there normally would. Two of them were Kashiwagi's friends, but she's absent now. I left my backpack and water bottle in class, taking only my chair with me. Some might have wanted to stay till it's time to go, but I wanted to leave before Kashiwagi gets here.

I put on the shoes I had just taken off at the school locker and entered the field. The welcoming frame decorated with the blue and red flowers Kashiwagi made last week had been set on the field.

"We should just use alien hair instead of making this stuff."

I recalled Kashiwagi saying something along that line when she's working. I would have said, 'why don't you get some at the barber's,' but I didn't. Maybe she should have.

I placed the chair at the fifth grade's resting area marked with white lines. I'm on red team; there are also white and blue. It wouldn't have been strange if I was put into blue for my hair colour. It wouldn't have made me happy though. Aside from the girls, there's a few boys sitting in the resting area too. They said hi as they saw me, so I waved at them too. "Morning."

I sat down on my chair. There's no one in the parent area on the opposite end. Not surprising.

"....."

Will the old guy come? I suddenly became aware of something trivial.

With the tail of summer still sweeping, I waited for the sports meet to begin in

this damp heat.

Something slowly drained from my back; boredom overwhelmed me.

It was not until my second yawn did all the students gather to begin the opening ceremony. We even did warm-ups. I didn't need to since I ran all the way here, but Mr. Baldie won't be too happy if I don't, so I moved a little.

When I twisted my waist to look backward, Kashiwagi, whose height landed her just slightly behind me, met eyes with me. She grimaced; I could only frown every time I see that expression.

Parents began arriving during warm-up and the principle's monotonous speech. In no time they filled the parents' section.

As though that was the cue, the first event — ball rolling — began, while I sat on my chair.

I'd spent almost the entire morning chatting with my friends, or staring blankly with head on my hands.

To be honest I was falling asleep. I glanced to see if the old guy and his cat were on the opposite side, but, at least where I could see, I didn't see them. Mom hadn't come either. She'd wave impetuously.

Oh, but if the old guy and his cat showed up, people might call the police on them. What do I do? Well, I wouldn't blame them. It should be fine... I think.

A few moms were seemingly discussing about something about seeing my hair and eyes. It's not an uncommon sight, but when they start talking to their husbands, I get upset.

Not much happened besides that until the game before lunch — Tug-or-war. Students who'd done nothing but talk gradually entered the welcoming door when it's time for the fifth graders. Those who hate sports meet, who also happened to not like moving during P.E, carried a nasty scowl. Did their moms not come?

We lined ourselves up based on height and entered; everyone grabbed onto the rope laid on the field. I felt the parents' gaze upon my hair. I wanted to shout, 'stop staring, stupid!'

“Watch yourself, alien.”

Behind me, Kashiwagi tauntingly warned me in her special way. I didn't pay her any mind then, but as soon as the game began, I pulled hard and lied down on her. 'Ah~' she yelped as I squashed her into the ground.

After the somewhat interesting tug-of-war match came lunch break. Since the school had decided that it's fine to eat anywhere, some people went to the parents' section. I knew ahead of time mom won't show up, so I went to my classroom.

“No~! If only the part timer didn't ask for the day off! I would have left work for Eri~!”

Mom slapped on the floor like a capricious child yesterday while grudgingly said so. That was all it took for me to be glad of mom.

I stuck a tongue out — and I don't need dad.

Currently blue team had the highest score. I don't care for winning at the least, but now red was last, and with a bit of distance behind white. That really doesn't matter though.

After entering the school building, I looked back at the parents' seats. Neither mom, the old guy nor the cat was there. I felt no disappointment after confirming that fact as I went into the classroom.

I prepared myself as I took my lunchbox out of my pack. The food inside was untouched. Thank goodness. I was right to believe in Kashiwagi. Though I did kinda lay on her during the tug-of-war.

The water jug wasn't poisoned or peppered with eraser shaving — now I'm relieved. Due to my almost wanting to change my view on Kashiwagi, I searched for her in the room; she was just about to leave with her jug and backpack. Perhaps because we met eyes, she grinned creepily.

It's almost like Kashiwagi and I are just two friends who only fight each other — it's not a great feeling. To ease the thought, I began eating mom's dish. “So good~” I'm going to tell mom how good the food was later.

After lunch, I left the classroom right away, heading for my seat. Mom could

already be here, so I hurried down the stairs.

Putting my shoes on frantically, I returned to the field. I sprinted toward the field; the sun peeked itself from the crevices between the clouds. Like playing musical chair, I sat down as fast as I could. Hand on my forehead, I searched for mom.

“Ah...”

Mom wasn't there — but the old guy was. With the cat on his shoulder, he stood there wearing casuals. Sandwiched between two families, he had on a difficult expression. We locked eyes.

He smiled sheepishly, rubbing his cat's head. Something in my head clicked as I witnessed the old guy standing there:

“Is this what having your dad at the sports festival like?”

But I hate dad. I don't like the old guy that much, either. Was that why I overlapped the old guy with the dad I've never seen? It's a world that someone who's never seen him outside of old photos could understand. The person known as my father was an existence even further than Jupiter.

We traded look for a while, but since the afternoon games were about to begin, I had to disengage. And I was about to go; mom should be here now, so I decided to look for her first.

“Is mom still not here?”

This was far more nerve-wrecking than waiting for the meteor shower on a summer night. Probably because the only way for me to show mom how great I am was in this sports festival. Mm...

Mom still had not arrived — maybe she's unusually busy today. While waiting, ball-toss had begun. Since scavenger hunt was next, I had to leave my spot.

“Ugh...” With mom's absence was still on my mind, I haplessly moved toward the entrance.

As I arrived to line myself up based on height, I check the parent's section again.

“Ah!”

There was mom. She hopped exaggeratedly on the last row, waving; I could easily spot her within a second. Once we saw each other, her motion intensified. I knew it was gonna happen, but I still felt embarrassed. 'Woo! Eri!' I heard the exhilarated clamour. I thought that perhaps even parents of first graders wouldn't get so excited seeing their kids. As expected of my mom. I don't know why, but she's just different than the other adults.



'I don't know why, but she's just different than the other adults.'

I waved a little, and sensed my face turn team red.

After ball toss had ended, and the balls and baskets taken away, we jogged into the field's track. Then we sat there, waiting to be arranged for the scavenger hunt.

First year, second year, third year... We had to go in this order, so it would be a while before us fifth graders. Two people on red team, two on white, two more on blue. Six people in a row; at first, the first graders began running along the tracks. Since the first graders had to run shorter distance than we, they immediately arrived at where the papers with the items written on were. Seeing their item names, they ran in disarray toward either the parents' section or their resting area. I looked for a bit, but turned away from boredom. My eyes drifted to where mom was.

I had to wave occasionally at mom, whose jumping around was causing a bit of an inconvenience to the parents around, and sometimes look at the old guy who claimed he couldn't find his conclusion. Both had on complicated expressions. I began running, for the sake of destroying these complications with a ballistic path.

It was finally my row's turn. Since fifth graders had to run half a lap to the goal, the distance was 150 metres. The catch was that we have to go scavenge for our item halfway there.

That's how simple the game was. I glanced at my opponents — I should be able to make it there first. The issue was my object. The students in charge of the papers laid six slips of rectangular paper on the track. Once they left, the game began.

I stomped onto the ground, arching my body slightly forward. I'd never learned how to run, so I just move as hard as I could going forward.

This is the battle between grade schoolers, as well as the standard procedure of running on planet Earth.

I peered at the parental section, then the goal on the other side.

Once I reached there, will I be closer to space?

No, I don't think so...

The moment I thought so while looking back, the gun went off. My feet went forward beautifully at the sound of the gun.

Upon my first kickoff, I knew it was a great start: the forward motion was good, enough to make my body feel lighter. Sometimes I could run like this.

As though the Earth had lost three percent of its gravitational force, I felt no pain as my feet trampled the ground. No other footsteps were heard beyond my own. Everything was going well.

Accompanied by my own footsteps, on my own track, I accelerated more with the cheering of the crowd and the music broadcasting. If it were the hundred metres race I'd be crowned the hero right away, but such folly is why human could never fly on a bicycle.

I charged forward, preparing myself as I picked up the paper laid on the track.

After seeing the word written across the slip, I could feel my face turn hot.

Ah, of course.

The thing I had to look for, scribbled in a terrible font, 'an alien.'

I had no doubt it was written by Kashiwagi.

I shot a look at Kashiwagi at the fifth grade's area. On her ugly face was an irritating grin; the paper was crumbled inadvertently by my hands.

How did she do it? Was someone in charge of writing the papers part of her goons? It seemed that she even had friends in the people who put the slits down. I guess her exasperating smile for the past few days where an omen to this. What the heck! Mom's watching today — why'd she thought of something so ridiculous? Even a first grader would come up with something less nonsensical! This jerk!

What do I do? I can't just run to the goal because people call me alien, can I? Of course not. That's just cheating!

That stupid Kashiwagi!

...Just kidding. Ms. Kashiwagi, is this all that you could do?

“Hahaha!”

I’d predicted this from a week ago! I’d fought with her for so long, I know what she would probably do! Kashiwagi’s weakness is that she could never be downright dirty when it comes to messing with me!

I’ve long expected this, and I already found an ‘alien.’

That’s why I handed the pamphlet to the old guy.

You’re too naïve, Kashiwagi — I’ve already made contact with an alien.

I ran toward the old guy without a doubt. He remained where he was since the beginning, so I located him right away. The cat was still on his shoulder.

My running toward him must have spooked him; he leaned back. The cat slid off, landing smoothly on the ground.

Mom flailed her arms still at the parents’ section, but she seemed to question where I was running toward. Sorry, mom, but my subject wasn’t ‘a beautiful lady,’

“Old guy!”

“W-what? You’re not looking for an old guy, are you? Oh... The cat?”

The flabbergasted old guy held his cat in front of me. Perhaps anxious that its legs were off ground, the cat wagged its tail and legs worriedly. The mom and dad next to the old guy seemed shocked by my running toward the man.

“No. You, old guy.”

Since the topic was limited to just humans, I don’t need the cat.

“I can understand if you want the cat, but aren’t there plenty more old guys around?”

He looked around. That’s not what I’m looking for. I hopped over the rope sequestering the parental section and grabbed the old guy’s hand. “Whoa...” The old guy seemed to moan.

“This is what I’m looking for.”

I showed the paper with ‘alien’ written on it to him. A strange expression immediately ensued, and he moved away from the paper. To get closer to his

face, I pretended to grow.

“Couldn’t you pretend you’re no longer a human, but an alien?”

“.....”

“Old guy, it’s not the end yet. Give up on flying and start running.”

I tugged his hand. Hurry up, you idiot. The others will win if you don’t.

“Let’s go, old guy.”

I hopped over the rope as I dragged him along. He stopped to untangle himself from the rope, but after a while, he came over to grab my hand, staring at the end of the runway.

“Thanks, kiddo.”

His thank had no appreciation in it.

In return, I put up a proud front, to hide my own embarrassment.

“I cannot abandon a space-lover in arm.”

“Sorry, I guess.”

He awkwardly crossed the rope, and swung his legs in the same manner. He ran, in a shamble like he had forgotten how to tread on ground. I had no way of winning first place with the way he ran— even now the other contestants were overtaking us.

But that’s fine.

Because I felt that as long as we reached the destination together, something will be accomplished.

This must be the first time that I’ve held the hand of an adult who’s not my mom. We ran toward the goal.

“You could go to space again if you get a running start.”

“I hope so.”

I ran with the old alien toward the goal.

Not a bike, the moon or the sky. Just kicking of the ground.

I pulled the old guy who's in need of exercise, toward the goal that I, a human being, could run to.

I ended up as fourth place in the scavenger hunt.

"Who's this?"

"I borrowed him. He's an alien."

"A what?"

"He's been to space, so he's an alien."

"Okay..."

Such a conversation occurred at the goal where the teacher would check items brought by students.

I was disqualified... Or rather, somebody messed with my paper slit, so it's hard to say what my rank was. The result didn't even matter, because fourth place gets no points.

Nothing matters to me anymore. I stared at the old guy who'd returned to the parents' section with his cat. Hot breath escaped my throat; the old guy smiled troubledly.

Mom seemed to have spoken to him. Something along the line of 'why the hell are you hanging around my daughter?' was heard. He could only play along with a wry smile.

Kashiwagi glared at me from the fifth-grade section.

It's possible that she's upset that I did not panic around the field from the topic like she had hoped. Her cheeks were on the verge of exploding. I felt a smile creep up on my face when I saw her.

"That's what you get." I had not laughed at Kashiwagi like this in a while.

Few days passed after the sports festival. The old guy disappeared from the park. It was getting cold, he said, so he migrated south.

"The sports festival was nice. I want to try again after seeing you kids. I'm thankful that you brought me there."

"Ehehe~"

I will run as hard as I could on the ground, and fly into the sky.

After hearing me say so, the old guy said, 'I'm looking forward to it.' They did not sound like perfunctory words.

"I made money before anyway, so I can still do it... I think."

He left the jungle gym with a sheepish smile.

'If it were just one last time, then I might go to space again,' he left those words.

The old guy didn't bring the cat.

"It likes the place."

He explained, but I'm positive he doesn't speak cat.

But if it stays here, then it'll have to deal with the winter that drove even the old guy away, so I felt bad for it. Mom said we couldn't keep a pet, so she put up notices in front of the store. Unfortunately, I know mom's Wagashi shop doesn't get much traffic, so I'm a little worried.

My worries disappeared the following day.

The part timer at the Wagashi shop adopted the cat. The lady that appeared to be in high school came to the park to check out the cat.

"Mm... Not bad, it's cute."

She smiled somewhat mischievously, poking the back of the cat. The cat, curled up in a ball, did not put up a fight.

"Do you like it?"

"Mm... It's the exact image of a cat, and it seems noble."

The lady nodded in admiration.

"I used to like how boys are like cats."

She seemed to recall something, gently staring with downcast eyes at the cat.

"What are you going to call it?"

"A name... Let's go with 'Liar.'"

The cat meowed at the calling of, uh, its name, 'liar,' like it knew it was its name. Its tail wagged, like barely in the dusk. It seemed to like the name. But why 'liar?'

She kept calling the cat she hugged 'little liar,' all while petting its head.

The cat was a female.

"Nng..."

In the morning of a hot summer day, I dreamt something nostalgic while wrapped in sheets. Though my mind unclear, like blended with dreams or perhaps a slideshow, I think that was pretty much the gist of it all. The scar that had disappeared from my face long ago twitched, reminding me of how it felt.

I almost forgot that I've met the lady from the hair salon before. But she doesn't seem to remember either anyway.

"Mm..."

The dream I held at that time wasn't something that would shine in the darkness of the sheets. Only the darkest of clouds and nights will stay forever apart from space. Though the sweat on my forehead does stick.

Even if the stars I see now were real, I no longer reach for them.

Along with the six months when I disappeared in the first year of high school, my dream was lost. Touwa Erio, who had wanted to fly as an astronaut, could not graduate from high school.

I fell. And because the word sounds similar, I've failed, too. I did something shocking, sending out my freakiness. I did even more embarrassing things that I'd want to hide in space for.

Just like the old guy from before, I probably won't be able to look at my dreams any more. Yet, in a different sense than the old guy, I could no longer let go.

But as I lay in the sheets, wrapped up, I regret nothing.

I'd made up my mind — I can let go now.

Maybe I can't leave Earth in a rocket, but it's the same thing.

It's the tallest peak I could aim for now.

Because I can fly into the distant sky on a bicycle.

Because another human is willing to accompany me.

That's why I was able to come back to this home, as a human.

"Mm..."

"Oh, so that's where you are..."

Speaking of the devil.

Because of the sheets, my sight was bleared; I could recognise that voice right away.

The cousin that started living with us since April; the cousin known for his love for smell, and the feeling and footsteps he emanates when he enters. He would have appeared to have stopped next to my head.

"You're looking real hot in that."

The cousin commented rudely. He often plays my chaperone, despite being the same age as me. He's always losing his cool when he's talking or getting messed with mom. The cousin is still a kid, like I am.

"Mm..."

"Alright, pipe down, or I'm gonna ask somebody to use you for archery practice."

The cousin continued with his crass words, and reached under me and the sheets. He put me on my feet.

"Mm..."

I protested, 'what are you doing? I'm trying to stay safe here.' Though I couldn't see his face directly, I had a feeling what kind of attitude he had.

"Okay~" He's probably just dealing with me perfunctorily now.

But...

Because he's willing to deal with me at all, he's great.

Something is just... Great.

“The pizza’s here, let’s go.”

“Mm!”

In this home on earth, the smell of pizza that I call ‘family’ is always special.

Chapter 4 - Distance Between My and Her Moon

Q: Select the appropriate words to fill in the blank:

[] x [] x [] = []

[Niwa Makoto]

[Hoshinaka Ko'umi]

[Her boyfriend]

[Christmas Eve]

['What's this Youth-Point?]

[In the park at night, coffee in hand]

[Get punched]

[Preparing for exams is hard]

[Two people alone in the library]

[A faint first love?]

[This would be three Youth-Points]

“What's this Youth-Point?”

Words that obviously just sprung out from her mind escaped Hoshinaka's mouth. Sitting next to her on the bench, I merely grinned wryly; white breath exited my lips. Seeing what could qualify as signal smoke coming out from my mouth, I shivered at the renewed realisation of the coldness. Unable to resist any longer, I stood from the worn-down wooden bench that could have easily been mistaken as ice.

“Niwacchi?”

I ignored Hoshinaka's call, proceeding in the dense air that enveloped the night. Even by just inhaling the frigid air was enough to give me the illusion of being filled up.

As I left the bench, I saw, for just a moment, a picture: A hallucination of a child, playing by himself in the sandpit next to the seesaw. It might have been a much younger me, but seeing oneself playing is not much of a possibility.

The freezing wind attacked me unrelentingly; my nose and lips were paralysed as if detached from my face. I adjusted the scarf warped around my neck, as to cover my lower face.

My goal was by the entrance of the park — the thing which continued casting its light in the darkness. Thank goodness vending machines run on 24/7 basis. Convenience stores in the countryside had already given up on doing so.

I stuck my half-frozen fingers into the pocket of my coat. It took a while to open my palm, which was stuck in a fist. After a bit of searching, I felt a few coins on the tip of my fingers. Fortunately, the changes from a while ago was in there. Would have been real depressing if I didn't have any money.

Since there were only three 100-yen coins in my pocket, I put all my investment into the coin slot. *Beep~ Clank Beep Clank Beep Clank~* Like so, the machine tailed along, recognising the 300 yen. Red lights appeared from the buttons beneath the cans. I turned to look at the bench where Hoshinaka sat; I wondered what she'd like. Going back was too much of a hassle, so I stood there, blinking in contemplation. In the end, I chose a coffee that had a lot of sugar. I don't drink unsweetened coffee, hence the choice.

After pushing the button twice, I kneeled to retrieve my drinks. Two of the light bulbs were broken. They were separate, but I thought maybe they were looking at one another. Perhaps they're the two who stuck together because they didn't fit in anywhere else.

"Oops." Because I pressed too quickly, the two cans of coffee were stuck in the depository. The white words 'please retrieve your items one by one' were printed on the plastic cover of the exit. Following my movement, the cover squeaked at the axel.

"You could have written it anywhere else."

I stuck my arm in there, attempting to get the coffee out. When I got hold of the can that showed only half of its ugly design, I felt the warm on my frozen hand. Simple thing like feeling the temperature go up was able to bring my morale back up, in this park that's filled with nothing but bad memories. It would have been an otherwise intolerable heat, were my palms not frozen. Actually, it's getting there. I pulled hard and produced the coffee.

Perhaps because my fingertips weren't as responsive, I easily retrieved the drinks. Though the vending machine whined as though it was being damaged, the lights on it shone still. I exhaled in relief. As soon as I picked up the second can, I straightened my knees.

An ache struck my head as I stood. Thanks to the recent lack of sleep, migraine became well acquainted with me. Preparing for exams is definitely not a healthy thing, but purportedly it's all for the sake of a better future. The future and now are both part of life — Sometimes, I felt like we're putting the cart before the horse.

With the coffee as my handwarmers, I returned to the bench where Hoshinaka was at. I looked up as I walked. I've enjoyed a clear night sky for as long as I remember. Due to the absence of the sun, the shape of the sky and the movement of clouds were easily traced. It's like the depth of the sky could be seen and felt.

Plus the moon is usually visible on a clear night like this. Looking at the moon, I could feel the distance between me and Hoshinaka. It's an analogy that only I knew, so I bet no one else could understand.

Her hands between her butt and the bench, Hoshinaka, with legs outstretched, looked up when she discovered my return. She sniffled with a grin; perhaps because of her scarf, hat and clothing, the usually diminutive Hoshinaka appeared chubby. 'I thought you left.'

I made no effort to reply; I merely stared at the long hair that waved in the breeze.

"Your hands."

"Mm?"

“Give me your hands.”

“Ok.” She earnestly pulled her hands out from beneath her, dangling them above her shoulders.

“Hm...” I nodded ambiguously and tossed the can over with a perfect arc. ‘Whoa!’ She cried as she followed the can and moved her hands to where it would land. With a subtle lean forward, she caught the coffee with the tips of her fingers.

I worried about her fingers being hurt, but seeing the smile on her face, I ceased all concern. As though seeking warmth, I put my now-free hands around my canned coffee.

Moments later, I sat a little away from where Hoshinaka was.

I once again was embraced by this lonely night.

“Niwacchi, you’re awfully nice today.”

“I always am. I show up whenever you call me up.”

“That’s why I said you’re nice today, too.”

Without a second thought, she chugged the coffee down her tiny throat. My can remained closed, continuously providing my hands with warmth. It was then that I leaned into my knees, elbows on the thighs.

“Ahh... Thanks. Want your money back?”

“That’s alright.”

I shook my head. Every time I did that, my ears mingled with the night painfully. Even tiny movement was filled with agony — I now understood what hibernating animals go through. Unwilling to move, I naturally didn’t look up into the sky.

“Are you studying for the tests?”

Hoshinaka picked something we had in common to talk about. With no desire to move, I answered ‘yeah’ without looking at her. Moments later, I added, ‘you?’

“Mm? I guess. Not as much as you, though.”

“Me (僕) too... I mean, me (俺) too.” I realised just how embarrassing it was to correct myself like that. Hoshinaka lowered her head, trying not to laugh.

“Niwacchi, you still say ‘me.’”

“Shut up. Just don’t notice it.”^[21]

After she pointed that out, I shrunk even more. In the same pose, I asked the question that’s been saved up: “Why did you call me out?”

I seem to recall some sort of explanation when we’re on the phone, but I’ve already forgotten as I was studying English at the same time.

Perhaps because of the coffee, she spoke with a voice much warmer than before.

“I thought I’d come out and take a look at the sky when I’m free.”

Can’t you do that in your room?

From a glance, I could see her focused on none other than the coffee in her hands. Ever since we came here, Hoshinaka’d been staring straight ahead.

“Couldn’t you come by yourself?”

I shot a glimpse at the two bikes resting next to the bench.

“It’s too sad to be alone.”

“Then couldn’t you get your boyfriend?”

“He didn’t want to because it’s too cold.”

So I’m the backup, huh. A dark feeling roused, surpassing the coldness. I shot her a look, finding her lips touching the can’s opening, and her eyes straight ahead. Her stare was on somewhere far away, where I don’t exist.

Was she missing her boyfriend, who’s presumably in the warmth of his house? The thought soothed my emotion; I looked down again. I didn’t even have the strength to complain, possibly because of this weather.

“This is some sweet coffee.”

She commented on something no one asked for. I had not drunk mine, so I could neither assent nor rebuke her thought. There’s still something else to be

said.

“You’re welcome to not drink it if you’re gonna complain.”

“You’re really no good with unsweetened coffee, Niwacchi.”

The lines that do not reciprocate one another stood side by side. It’s slightly annoying to be treated like a kid by someone your own age. Even though I was already a bit on the down side, this felt like my ankles were shaved off by the frozen ground. Keeping my head low, I turned to face her.

There she was, without a particular emotion on her face and coffee pressed against her cheek. After meeting eyes, I at least felt a bit awkward. When it comes to Hoshinaka, there’s this feeling that’s neither hatred nor annoyance, but still something I want to reject. I should be glad that it’s not a question that will be included in the exams.



'There she was, without a particular emotion on her face and coffee pressed against her cheek.'

She smiled hurriedly, and spoke with a cheery, yet seemingly masquerading voice...

"Sure smells like Youth here."

"Who cares about 'youth...?'"

The sound of that phrase embarrassed me.

To my unabashed criticism, Hoshinaka replied, 'your heart has withered.'

The cloud that I saw early must have already disappeared.

It was December.

A time for exam preparation.

We weren't in a position to be out at night.

Yet there I was, sitting on the bench with Hoshinaka.

The only thing we shared were runny noses, and the cans of coffee gradually losing their warmth in our hands.

Hoshinaka refers to me as 'Niwacchi.' It's a shorthand for 'Niwacchi-kun.' No one else called me by that though, and most called me by my surname. Oh yeah. My name is Niwa Makoto, currently in third year of middle school.

I might be a little on the aloof side, but it's not abnormal to have people like me in a middle school. I'm what you'd call a regular, a-dime-in-a-dozen teenager.

Mom gave me a tongue lashing for sneaking out last night. Her self-righteous punishment was for my allowance to be cut in half until I graduate middle school.

That's why I showed up to class, bummed out. Actually, I've been feeling pretty strange in class recently. Still, I showed up to face the teacher and the blackboard. It isn't just me: Everyone else looked exhausted.

Because of the impending exams, both the atmosphere in the room and people's health were deteriorating. It was a claustrophobic feeling, that one

moment you are able to roam freely in the plaza, and then the next you are thrown into a giant test tube. While the heater from the back was able to provide an arid heat, it also dried our throat and eyes, distracting us all.

Even being released from school was not enough. It's like being told to finish an unsolved puzzle tomorrow. There's no relaxing until we finish our tests — looks like we can only endure it.

Outside the warm classroom, the cold, December hallway only seemed gloomier. The ash-like cloud blocked out the sun; the field outside the window had an otherworldly hue.

The grey triggered a dark feeling unlike when the night's arrived. I could not find myself walking energetically through these halls. While yawning, I dragged my feet forward.

Migraine from prolonged sleep deprivation and somnolence assaulted my brain. I often wondered if I'd nap a little after dinner when I get home. Most of the time, however, my conscious wouldn't fade completely as I lie in bed. It all ends in hours wasted as I roll about, a sense of refusing to rest almost bursting out of my body. That was how stretched my mind was.

The dreary air of the classroom sunk into my blood, forcing me to stay in front of the desk to study. It's not like the high school I'm heading into is a prestigious one, but even a regular student would be anxious first time taking an entrance exam. With every solved math problem, the worries attenuate. You could think of it as a nosy tutor.

I saw a familiar face in the hall appear from a different classroom. I couldn't help but shut an eye — It was Hoshinaka. She had on an extra coat over her uniform, with no scarf or cap on today.

Hoshinaka was two classes away from mine. We were in the same class last year, which is also how we became acquainted. With neither her boyfriend or friends, Hoshinaka approached my direction. Though facing the window, I knew from her gaze the sky wasn't her object of wonder.

As she passed, Hoshinaka noticed me. She gave a peace sign and a smile, which was not the same to that shown with friends. I backed up promptly, mindful of the surrounding eyes. It's astonishing how small a school is, and how

fast rumour spreads. It would not take too long for her boyfriend to hear about this peace sign if a particularly gossipy girl witnessed it.

Luckily, everyone in the hall was looking down, seemingly disinterested in others. I sighed in relief. ‘Oops, sorry.’ Hoshinaka bumped her shoulder into me. As I wondered in disbelief of her intent, she had already drifted away.

“Uh...” I wanted to say a few things, but the thoughts could not form into words.

When I came to it, I discovered a piece of ripped notebook paper between my fingers. There’s no need to think about the perpetrator — Who else but the one who ran into me? If not a prank, it must be a message to me.

I unfolded the paper. A few rounded fonts in blue were printed there.

“Come to the library if you’re free.”

“.....”

The thought ‘why not just say it’ did not cross my mind.

I never really considered what went through my head.

It’s not a test, after all.

And so, without looking toward the window, I turned back and muttered, ‘Heck no.’

But she definitely couldn’t hear it.

Standing at around 150 centimetres and having a tiny face, Hoshinaka gave off a petite mien. A low nose and pair of large eyes, she was like a character from a shoujo manga with a realistic touch. Nobody probably would see her as a shy girl upon their first meeting, because she was the manifestation of amicability.

No guys, including me, thought ill of Hoshinaka when they first meet her.

Warmth from the library AC welcomed me as I entered. The devices are usually installed in facilities such as the infirmary or staff room, with the remote control within the reach of students. Naturally, we change the temperature arbitrarily. Still, compared to the winter, the upcoming rain season of June will

be far worse.

I was able to immediately locate Hoshinaka in the library — because she was the only one playing her phone, without even a book or notes in front of her. Seemingly considerate of those around her, she fiddled with her phone quietly, what with the careful motions.

I wanted to leave when I saw that, but she spotted me frozen there when she looked up from her phone. Hoshinaka beckoned, and even took the coat hanging from a chair off to give me a spot. Affected by her act of preparation, I moved soundlessly. Why did I go somewhere other than the shoe lockers, despite saying not wanting to come? My head must hurt more than usual.

I pulled out a chair next to Hoshinaka; the metal frame of the chair was just a little more comfortable than the wooden ones in classroom. Right away my tired head fell onto my hands. While unable to fall asleep, the fatigue wrapped around my skull drove me sick.

“You continue to be a great guy today, Niwacchi.”

She rested her phone on the table, beaming a smile.

“Just by not calling me out late in the night, you’ve already improved, Hoshinaka.”

I countered, to which she shrugged humorously, ‘that’s just harsh.’ I, on the other hand, became overcome with sadness: I’m not one to study right after getting home, but I didn’t want to see Hoshinaka either.

“You seem a little blue.”

“My allowance was cut in half. For sneaking out in the last night.”

“Ouch... That’s bad.”

“So? What do you want? We’re not here to stare at the ceiling, are we?”

With a bored jab, I questioned her. Since when was the distance between me and Hoshinaka so awkwardly long? We easily held conversations last year.

“Well... A little something just went down.”

She prefaced with a confusing and mysterious sentence. She continued.

“Someone saw us going to the park.”

My blinking stopped. Like having no lead come out from a mechanical pencil despite numerous clicking, the stagnancy worried me.

“Who heard?” I held onto the hope that perhaps my chance of survival will increase by that question.

“My boyfriend.”

Of course. Who else aside from him would it be problematic? After confirming the truth I already know, the storm came. I unlocked my supporting arm; my face slid onto the desk.

“Please spare me from this.” I looked at Hoshinaka with only an eye.

“He hasn’t come after you yet, has he? He might be waiting for you at the shoe locker.”

She didn’t have on a difficult face, just a casual, downcast look.

“Please don’t involve me (僕)... I mean, me (俺).”

“Oh, cut the tough guy talk. Just say ‘me,’ won’t ya?”

Shut up. I (僕) doesn’t suit me (俺), I think. I don’t feel like I’m playing adult, but does feel like wearing shoes an extra size of my feet and almost tripping.

I’ll be able to use ‘me’ (俺) one day, I think.

“He just hung up when I called him, but he apparently changed his mind and called back. He knew I snuck out, and he went around to ask people. Some girl told me she saw me with you.”

I should have known and not walk her home... ‘The road to home is dangerous’ just had a different meaning to me. Warm air from the AC blew by my face.

I looked elsewhere, onto the paper stuck on the wall. Written on the paper was the return dates for loaned books It’s December, nearly the end of the second semester. ‘Please remember to return your books by winter break’ it says. Right, it’s almost winter break, and Christmas... But it’s not relevant to a student preparing for exams.

“So, well, my boyfriend yelled at me.”

She ended the report on a swift note. I don't know why, but as the warmth left me, the air I'd been holding escaped me. My chest and stomach lost their shape, making me wonder if I was a just filled with air.

“And you're telling me this why? Shouldn't you be talking to your boyfriend instead?”

“I guess. But I'm a little scared of him.”

That's not a proper answer to my concern. It's like 'maybe' on a true-false question.

“Aren't you a little too relaxed?”

“What do you mean? Who is?”

“I mean you lovebirds. I can't believe you have the time to be doing this kind of stuff.”

My words were half sardonic and half jealous, but spoken in a way that only the former could be felt. She wouldn't understand why I'm jealous, anyway.

Hoshinaka froze for a moment. She recovered soon, blinking, and nodded as she gathered herself.

“Gotta get those Youth Points, you know?”

“You don't get what I'm saying, do you?” She definitely didn't understand me. She puts her hands under her head, shortening our distance.

“Y'know.”

“Hm...” I sniffled.

“If I incarnated a hundred times, and meet you every time, I'd probably date you 40 times.”

A little sudden.

But also a little late.

My voice was lost upon those words. Only a flat, toneless sound came.

“Meaning... You'd go for the other guy 60 times.”

What are you expecting me to feel?

“That’s it.”

“Okay...”

The superficial comment ended there. Still, something stuck to my heart; like a turtle in an aquarium tank, it tried to crawl its way out. It wasn’t a funny sensation, and certainly not something I’d want pity over.

“I’m leaving.” With the declaration, I stood up. Pain struck as I got a hold of my backpack; I winced.

Without waiting for Hoshinaka’s response, I headed toward the exit. To the person who didn’t touch the page of a book, the student at the counter gave me a ‘the hell did he come in for?’ look. I wonder, too.

“Sorry, Niwacchi.”

She spoke in a voice that everyone in the room could have heard, to which I couldn’t help but pause in my track.

“It’s too late now...”

I don’t even know why she’s apologizing. Without looking back, I ventured back into the hallway.

The slide door was shut till it would not move anymore.

“I don’t want to enjoy this ‘youth...’”

I cannot become a normal friend with Hoshinaka, and our proper distance was lost.

It’s unfortunate for either of us... I should not have started thinking about this.

If someone were to ask if I like Hoshinaka, I would likely ponder for a while. If I do like her, I would have tried a lot harder last year.

Romantic feelings like sort of like an UFO: It’s not a concrete thing to be found, yet many seek it. Hoping to find a person of admiration or wanting to go further in a single-sided love is correct, just as it is to look for a mysterious flying object.

The issue lies in ‘what was between me and Hoshinaka?’. If we were to

discuss the topic of romance before addressing the question, it'd presume that such a thing existed between us. That's hardly a possibility, I think.

After we became third years, Hoshinaka somehow got a boyfriend. She also went to a different class, and we no longer talked. Even last night was a sudden invitation from her.

Because of that long window, the relationship between me and Hoshinaka was like the season itself, characterised by coldness. Instead of digging up my frozen sentiments, I merely hugged my knees to fight the chill. I even forgot to look at this night sky we shared.

I think, between me and her, there's a moon.

It's like the forty times that Hoshinaka spoke of: A person can't just fly to the moon. He could only look, up at it as it hangs faraway in the sky.

There's no way she and I could have something like love, and nothing more could be transmitted.

Up until I climbed back up after being socked by Hoshinaka's boyfriend, that was all that was on my mind. A flash in my memory reminded that he wasn't waiting by the shoe lockers, but the school's entrance.

As I noticed him approach, I lamented not having taken the backdoor. I just didn't want to take the long way home. That's just how I am, giving up so easily.

Also, calling him 'boyfriend' makes it sound like I'm his girlfriend, so I refrained from doing so, instead thinking of his name. Hoshinaka's never properly introduced him to me, so I don't really remember. Still, hand caressing my punched cheek, I muttered vaguely what I thought was his name.

"Takimoto."

"Hah?" His reaction was as short as the time it took for him to recognise me. Judging from that, I called the right name. From then I start to use the name 'Takimoto.' Half a head taller than I am, Takimoto took a step back after straightening his knees, refocusing his glare at me. The right fist that landed on my face was still there; apparently, he's still upset.

The inside of my mouth must have been cut when he punched me. The taste

of blood permeated through my nostril. It hurt, but it seemed to have blown away my fatigue as well as my melancholy. Unfortunately, I was merely thinking too much.

Some students were just about to leave. They stared as they passed; it was embarrassing, but thankfully they moved on as I met their look.

“Could you not punch people out of the blue?”

I thought it was a sensible comment, but it was only so before leaving my mouth. The stern look remained on Takimoto’s face — it was like that of a rat drawn on an encyclopaedia.

“What if I asked nicely?” He retorted.

“I’m gonna tell the teachers.”

Though petty a reply, it’s probably the correct one. At least it’s better than raising my fists in retaliation and getting both of us punished. Besides, Takimoto is considered a large guy, and I’m not a fighter. It would be unfair if I managed to land two hits with my twig arms while taking ten from his trunk-like arms, and still get the same punishment.

“Stay the hell away for Ko’umi.”

He ordered. For a moment I pondered what sea this Ko’umi is, then I realised it was Hoshinaka’s name. I’ve long forgotten since I’ve never used it.^[22]

“She was the one who called me out.”

“She won’t again, so you better stay clear of her.”

Takimoto, who’d just decided on his own who would be Hoshinaka’s friends, knocked his leg with a fist. Is that like how a horse would kick its back leg?

“Ugh...” Pain finally seeped through my swollen cheek.

Hoshinaka-san is now a princess, and Takimoto her knight. Is that how the characters are put together now?

What does this jerk who seems like he’d get a lot of Youth Points want? Is he gonna pummel me for some EXP? Why don’t you try by spending time with Hoshinaka? This guy is totally wrong.

Something about this is even funnier. I get why he wouldn't punch his girlfriend, and I agree, but you could at least yell at her. Getting punched by the boyfriend after being invited out by a girl. It's like a honey trap. I want no more of this.

Hoshinaka aside, it was a waste of time at least with Takimoto.

"Uh oh..." I looked to right, which only had a dried-up tree. As I confirmed that he'd been deceived, I sprung up.

I ran as fast as I could to through the road next to Takimoto. Evidently, he had been played, what with the slow reaction. Was he earnest, or simply dumb? He finally swung his trunk-like arm as I passed; though the back swing hit my back, I casually passed the gate.

The school only allowed students living outside of its district to ride bicycles, so I didn't have to worry about him catching up to me on one. Naturally, I had to rely on my legs to escape to safety.

I was going to give a wise crack to Takimoto as he followed me out, but with little time to think I simply shouted.

"Perverted kid! Think about your test!"

Whatever I just thought of sounded like a simple complaint. The sentiment of reaping what I sowed, as well as being humiliated flooded; I would have loved to correct myself, but I was already on the road back home under the supposedly-red sky. Takimoto said a few things, but pretending that the cold had my ears trembling, I refused to listen.

My breathing became more erratic; I raised my chin. The sight that welcomed me was, despite it being dusk, the faint silhouette of the moon hanging in the sky. Cutting through the cloud and sunken in the crimson, the moon gave off a weak light that had a different impression. If I reached forward, I might just steal a touch.

But I couldn't do that.

Giving up was my specialty. My dream of becoming a professional football player was curtailed in elementary school. Though I've regretted many things later, I never wanted to challenge anything anymore.

There's a lot more things in life that I must do before flying to the moon. Probably, yeah...

When I first met Hoshinaka, I (俺) was more like 'me' (僕). It was a more natural pronoun, and I had principles. In another year, after breathing the air of a new class, Hoshinaka spoke to me with the force and at a time that was enough to suffocate me. Not that I was trying to play along with her, but I did choke.

"Yo, Niwacchi-kun!"

"Niwa... Cchi-kun?:

I saw her face and tried to remember her, but even if it's someone I knew, no one had ever called me that. She was merely a classmate I just met. I remember being bashful when the girl called my name; even the tingle of blood surging into my face remains clear in my memory.

I had just become a middle school second year.

"You're the paper model club president, right? I saw your name on the orientation pamphlet."

Hoshinaka, with the rolled-up pamphlet on her shoulder, beamed a toothy grin. I nodded as I recall the photo of the school's entrance printed on the papers.

"I was made that only because we had four members."

On the second day of joining the senior-less club, I greeted our advising teacher, who then ordered, 'find a president.' Club attendance was mandatory in our school, so the four (including me) who joined this empty club pushed about the title of president.

And that's what happened. I don't think writing 'club president' on my transcript has much use.

"I can't believe you wrote 'looking for a club president.' That's hilarious. And kinda sad."

She spoke on with the same smile. Though my smile froze, she seemed to not mind.

“It’s true — I’m no leader material.”

“You said you don’t care who does it, so I guess you’re up, Niwacchi-kun.”

The name ‘Niwacchi-kun’ is so strange that I cannot face her.

Right, what club is Hoshinaka in?

“Oh yeah, Niwacchi-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s paper model? It’s not Origami, is it?”^[23]

“I’ll look it up next time.”

“Now that’s a president.”

Because of these small talk, I was able to chat with Hoshinaka even more. After a little investigation, I was able to begin my club life, as trivial as that is.

Hoshinaka and I got along well, and we ended up as good friends. We usually get to talk during cleaning, each with a rag or broom in hand. People who saw us would leave quietly, and that’s how we were. We don’t prioritise one another, but we were always together whenever possible. That’s the kind of natural relationship we had. It wasn’t anything suffocating, sort of like being able to feel the floor under the water.

Still, as friendly as we were, I could never do something as bold as calling her by her first name. She calls me ‘Niwacchi,’ a strange nickname. It would be a lie to say I didn’t see her as a girl then. It’s definitely a feeling of attraction, but not quite love. I think.

Like admiring the stars, but never having the passion to build a rocket.

The distance between me and her which can never be shortened was easy and comfortable. It changed, gradually. Instead of closer, it grew further apart.

It moved apart, slowly, like the moon and the Earth.

By the time I realised, our distance was like that between planets.

I ruminated on these things, rolling around in bed. The sun had gone. Someone called for me from downstairs. Doesn’t this seem like when I got beat up by Takimoto? I could not stand how simple my thought process was, and got

up. The strange sensation on my left cheek prompted me to touch it; my brows furrowed at the resulting sting. Right, Takimoto punched me. Wasn't I just thinking about this?

"Damn!" If I forget my English vocabularies or math formulas because of that, before I could feel anxious during the actual test, I'd wonder if all that time spend studying was wasted. It's both depressing and annoying to have the make that judgement. I remember some Tachibana guy once wrote, 'A completed manuscript may not be rejected, but it sucks when it does.' I don't remember where it's from or what his name was though.^[24]

"Makoto~" Mother called again from downstairs. "Coming!" The incessant calls annoyed me, so I dashed out. The repercussion of running into the wall ached from the side of my head, but I continued downward. I jumped off from the last three steps, landing on the hallway.

A surge of pang flashed through my head. "Agh..." A sense of vertigo, the pain and pulse went in and out as if respiring.

The hallway was different than my warm room: Cold is after all not advised for headaches.

"What are you doing?"

Seemingly irked, my mother, who was waiting by the hallway, spoke. I lifted my head, which felt much heavier than usual, to see her holding the telephone in her chest. A tiny frame and a somewhat youthful appearance, my mother stood there presumptuously and comedically.

"Why do you have to be in such a hurry? It's not safe."

Then don't call me twice. "What is it?" She often calls me for things like sliced apples, so I thought perhaps it's something similar this time.

"It's a call for you: A girl is asking if a 'Niwaschi-kun' is here. That's you, right?"

Hoshinaka. Here comes the name that nailed my stomach together. She's calling me again after yesterday. She's not asking me to go in her stead to meet Takimoto in the park, is she? I already begged her to not in the library, guess it didn't work.

Hehehe... My mother had an infuriating grin on her face.

“If it’s not school related, then she’s your girlfriend? You can’t go on a night date, though. Actually, you can’t go out in the night at all.”

“Shut up, I know.”

I just happened to have picked up the phone yesterday, but I’m a little embarrassed this time to have my mother answer and call for me instead.

“‘Niwacchi-kun’ could have been dad, you know. It might be whoever he’s an affair with.”

“If that’s who he’s sleeping with, then the police would have arrested him long before I laid my hands on him.”

She’s not wrong. I stole the phone away from my obviously excited mother. “Here come the police~” Making my escape from my mother, whatever horrible cries she’s emitting, I went upstairs. There was an urge to just toss the machine down the stairs, but instead of getting yelled at by Hoshinaka, I’d risk the wrath of my mother, so I endured.

“What? Can’t you at least use my name when you call?”

“Sorry? I forgot.”

The voice on the other end was not that of whoever dad’s having an affair with, but of my acquaintance Hoshinaka. Her cheerful voice was not like the traffic light, of which the lights would dim and brighten at moment’s notice.

“Was that your mom? Or your sister?”

“That’s my mother. It’s obvious from the way she talks, isn’t it?”

I could feel the warmth mixed with the cold as soon as I walked upstairs. Due to the door being open, the AC escaped out onto the hallway. Hurryingly, I shut the door as I entered.

“So, what do you want this time? I’m not going to the library or the park.”

I warned her first — This is retribution for stabbing my stomach. Hoshinaka just laughed awkwardly.

“Well... I just wanted to know what happened after you left.”

What? I don't get what's she getting at. If our literature exams are filled with similar questions, then my mock exam score will probably just barely dodge a bullet.

Still, this should be good practise for communicating with others.

And the question itself would mean she doesn't know about Takimoto punching me yet.

"Not a whole lot. Just that Takimoto punched me in the face when he saw me."

I spoke a bit sarcastically, but the other end did not give me my sense of satisfaction.

"Takimoto? Niwacchi, isn't that, like, assault? You need to find better friends."

Ignore the latter half, but from her questioning tone of the first half I could tell I've gotten her boyfriend's name wrong. I got socked by some guy whose name I don't even know. My student life isn't this radical, if I recall correctly. The tests must be messing with my mind.

"Actually, you can't exactly call that a friend, can you."

"Yeah, so, anyway, it's all good. All's fine and dandy."

"Very well. Tis good, then."

With a strange and almost theatrical accent, she replied. I should have told her to end the conversation entailing that.

The air and silence tortured my ears and tongue, disallowing me to just hang up.

And so, I delayed moving the phone downstairs for later and sat down on my bed. Puff! Dust from the sheets and the tepid AC air filled my lungs. I submerged myself into what felt like warm liquid pouring into my body — including the temperature, it's not at all comfortable.

"So then... Uh... You still there?"

Perhaps because of my silence, Hoshinaka, unsure what to say, checked for my presence.

We probably were able to feel one another's existence.

"I am."

"Thank goodness." What do you mean?

"Your boyfriend is gonna be mad again if he heard about you calling me."

My complaint was poignant, but correct. 'Wuu,' she held her breath after what sounded like having someone stabbed you in the chest with a finger. With nothing else to say I waited for her to speak.

"He was really mad. I even wondered if that's why they call it 'the fire of rage.'"

"Of course he would be."

Somehow, I could agree with that statement — not so much with being punched.

"Why would he be?"

"A girl you're going out with went to see a different guy at night, that doesn't sound too good."

What does she want a bachelor to say? That's why's the end of my reply wasn't at all persuasive. Dissatisfied with my answer, Hoshinaka gave an example.

"Then, if my boyfriend were to go see another girl on the weekend, can I get mad too and not study for the test?"

"I guess. Taki— I mean, your boyfriend isn't actually that smooth, is he?"

He does look like he's one of with the ratmen. Can't argue with how well rats multiply either.

"Probably not. It's just an analogy."

Then why don't you take your analogy to him instead of me. He, of course, wouldn't agree so easily. Plus talking about this is useless.

We could probably talk about something else.

"Um... Well..."

“Well?”

“No, nothing.” I’m just beating around the bush.

Why are you calling me?

Do you like me?

Even if it were through the phone, asking something like that would have made me an amazing person long ago. It’s likely a misunderstanding. This time, however, I believe both she and I have mistaken one another for something. It’s rare, and certainly not a good thing.

Hoshinaka must not comprehend the thing which exists between me and her. It’s futile even if I told her it’s the moon. There might be an alien hideout on the dark side of the moon... No, of course not.

Damn, I don’t know what I’m saying anymore. This has nothing to do with the aliens.

“Just... Don’t call me so often.”

“Aw, don’t sweat the small stuff. Just Youth it!”

She spoke like it was with a thumb’s up.

“I have no idea what you’re on about.”

I don’t know what this ‘youth’ is, aside from what the dictionary has to say about it.

“And could you please go find your boyfriend for this kind of stuff instead?”

I shot a glance at the desk. The reference books and practise questions piled there like in a bookstore. It saddens me to know that the money spent on those were supposed to go to my deep-sea creature encyclopaedia collection.

It’s absolutely awful to prepare for exams. Same goes to the me, who’s preparing to take on such things. Because it’s so awful that you start to lose things around you. Things in my heart, naturally, were taken on a whim.

Allowance. Leisure. Time. Health. If it could be taken gradually like a charity donation to keep me on the treacherous road of exam preparation, then could they decide my position based on how much I’ve given? From the standpoint of

my mock exam scores, though, it will be quite difficult.

“My boyfriend... It’s fine. Of course I love him.”

I sniffed hard when she spoke. Though unintentional, it was the noise that drowned that part of her words.

“But, I don’t know, whenever I thought of being young, you’re what shows up in my head.”

“That doesn’t quite fit my image.”

“I know. I know how often you update your ‘time spent single’ status.”

“Shut up.”

As much as I denied it, I could understand a little of what she meant. That’s why I couldn’t just hang up on her when she called.

“But I’m still looking for Youth from you.”

“What do you propose me to do?”

“So just go and enjoy Youth!”

“And what is this youth...?”

I turned my head while listening to the receiver. Cleaning my already impeccable room, I looked for what qualifies as ‘youth.’ Oh... There it is. It’s not mine, but there’s something outside that emanated just that.

“I see. Enjoy, huh...”

“Niwacchi?”

“Here’s what I’m gonna do.”

“Mm?”

“I’m gonna stare at the sky from my room. You should join me, Hoshinaka.”

I could see the moon. We usually communicate through the celestial body that hanged high in the evening sky.

To string the line on the moon and make a long-distance call.

We might not be able feel one another, but our abstract thoughts will appear.

In any case, I stared at the clear sky from the window.

Even if looking at the deep sea is a mere pipe dream, it's not so bad looking at the dark sky that resembles it.

"I can't. My phone's on my house's shoebox."

She dumped the bucket of water on me. The silhouette of the moon seemed to die a little.

"Is there a reason why you never want to stargaze?"

I asked curiously. 'Let's go stargazing at the park,' she said so yesterday. She never once looked up.

Upon the query, a faint laughter came from the receiver.

"You should save stargazing with someone else. It's an ace for Youth points, you know?"

"Hah? So what exactly is this 'Youth Point?'"

If that's a vocab for modern literature, I need to at least know its meaning.

"Well... Nothing, really. It's just something I made up."

Demanding someone else to do something that she won't. There's a lot of say about that. Plus, what she does isn't what my common sense could tolerate.

Could it be that Hoshinaka sees that hypocritical or irrational thinking 'Youth?'

But it's only going to cause problems for either of us if you seek that from me. Do not expect anything dramatic between me and her. The only conclusion is like the calm of water passing.

Even if something were to happen, it's only going to be a little bit of nothing.

"So you get it? Don't call me again if your boyfriend doesn't know."

For the sake of hanging up on her, I told her in a roundabout manner.

But if her boyfriend knew and let her do it, I'd feel even more insulted.

"I know. I will do that if I feel like it."

"Hey now..."

“Thanks for spending time with me again. Goodbye.”

With that as the closing, she hung up. I listened for a bit, letting the beeping of our severed call fill my ear drums.

I was obviously confounded. Will I be able to focus on studying tonight?

“I guess this is also a form of pervert, isn’t it?”

I lied down after putting the phone down on my desk. ‘Hm~’ I hugged my arms.

Was the light hitting my eyelids from the bulb, or the moon?

Two days passed without me being attacked by Takimoto (which is wrong, but it’s easier to use that name) or receiving a call from Hoshinaka. Since he’s not a radical, the former shouldn’t come to my house after the weekend.

He’s probably also preparing for his exams. I bet he also aspires to go the same school Hoshinaka is going.

“How lovely.”

I leaned back into the chair in my room while quietly whispering his goal that I just made up. It was now a frigid Sunday morning too difficult to be lazy on. Sun saturated outside the window, yet could not breach into the room.

My other friends are probably also giving up their day-off for the tests while staring at this cold sun.

The back of the mechanical pencil in between my teeth, I took a breather staring at the ceiling. I was sick of writing more Kanji. Graphite had darkened my right hand which had plastered the notebook. The whole situation reminded me when I was practising Kanji during grade school. What I mean is I didn’t skip out on doing those.

“But, is passing the certification test going to affect my grade at all?”^[25]

The school made us take the test, and I did. Having an award in the room is quite nice as a decoration, I suppose. I didn’t get that perfect attendance reward in grade school though.

And that’s how I slacked off while making the ancient chair squeak. As I

continued putting off work, the phone rang downstairs. I straightened the chair, irritated as though someone had just woken me up from an afternoon nap. Putting the pencil down first, I stood.

My parents were already gone when I went downstairs after getting up, so it was up to me to pick it up. While regretting about the fact that the phone wasn't on the second floor, I ran into the hall and down the stairs yelling, 'coming!' Again, at the last few flights, I jumped. It's a habit at this point.

It's still ringing. Déjà vu, as I put the phone to my ear.

"Niwa residence." I was full prepared to hear 'Niwacchi,' but the voice called me 'Niwa.' It was even a man's, and a familiar one at that.

"Oh, it's you, Aihara. What's up?" Hearing the voice of a friend I've known since grade school, my face relaxed.

"Not much. I was just wondering if you're free. Wanna go out for a bit if you are?"

"Aihara, what do you think a day-off before exams is for?"

"Yet here I am, somehow very bored."

"Right. Of course you are."

It's almost with certainty that Aihara will be recommended into a private high school. In the gloomy classroom, he's one of the few cheery people. He does, however, promptly banishes himself from the classroom after school's out.

"I'm not gonna make ya, unless you're really free."

"Going out, huh... Got a place in mind?"

"Nope. Let's go for burgers."

"Why not find a girl if you're going for lunch?"

"Mako-chan, if I had one I wouldn't be asking you."

"Don't call me that."

An ominous disgust crept up to me for some reason.

"Well?"

I turned to look at the kitchen. I don't recall a meal made for me.

"Alright, I'll go. Not for too long though."

"Oh~ Not bad. That's the kind of guy you are?"

"I don't plan on staying wishy-washy."

"You sound a little stressed, man. Whatever. Let's meet up at the store on the way to school, shall we?"

"Right. Got it."

"I'm waiting for ya, Kikuchi~"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll talk about that graduation trip."

It's a joke that only works because he's Aihara. Can't believe he knows the series too. ^[26] I rested the receiver. On the back of the advertisement pamphlet left next to the phone as notes, I wrote down about going out.

After leaving that note, I turned.

I ran upstairs for my wallet.

Though dubious of how much insulation the clothes will provide, I'm not about to test them out one by one in this weather. I put my utter faith in them. It's so cold — Even with the heavy covers my skin had already declared defeat.

Fortunately, before beginning to regret not eating cup ramen at home, I've arrived at our rendezvous. Then I searched the people passing by.

"Oh? There you are."

He found me first. Aihara, with just as much cover as I had, approached. Since both of us lived nearby, neither rode a bike here.

I greeted him with lips shut tightly against the wind. "Hey."

"You're as forgettable as ever."

"That stupid face of yours is not good sign on a day off."

I'll leave it up to you to decide who said what. After meeting up, we went into the burger shop. As a side note, I've always thought this 'burger shop' word is weird.

Perhaps because it's midday on a weekend, there're many families with children in there. In addition, the new merchandise displayed on the register was on sale, which is also probably why so many came.

After lining up, we finished our order and paid separately. Instead of the regular dining tables, we chose the seats near the windows to wait for our food to come.

"I asked two people first before calling you, Niwa. They weren't up for it."

He opened his mouth; I replied while taking the scarf off.

"Okay."

"One of 'em was a chick."

"So you were already shut down by one."

Guess he didn't need my advice. I actually thought he did something impressive. It takes quite a bit of courage to ask out a girl on a weekend as a countryside middle schooler.

"How's the studying going, master?"

He half-joking asked. That's what you call courtesy words.

"It's going."

"Whatever that means~"

He laughed drily. Not like there's much we have in common, anyway.

"Oh yeah, I heard you were in a fight. Is that true?"

"Hm? Oh..." He meant with Takimoto's fist. So it's spread, huh.

"Is that why you called me up?"

Hehehe... Aihara laughed as though getting a dirty joke. Bingo.

"I gotta find some guy who can give me a little excitement, you know?"

"Right. Too bad you're gonna be disappointed. It wasn't even a fight."

"Really? I heard you fought a big dude for some girl."

I smiled bitterly at the strange rumour.

Leaning forward, I rested my chin on the table.

“I just got beat up. The bruise’s already gone.”

“So you did get socked. Now that’s youth.”

He laughed at my injury. That’s what you call ‘youth?’ This isn’t boxing, you know.

“What is this ‘youth?’”

“It’s about dating, making memories at the cultural festival and stuff.”

Without mincing words, he replied rather weakly. Whoa! So that’s Youth.

And it seems like it’s got nothing to do with me. None of those applied for my experience.

“Oh?”

Just as I began the game of knocking the table with my chin, I saw some familiar faces.

It’s Hoshinaka and Takimoto. Regardless of what that guy’s name is, I know the first name to be right. Hoho! A date. How free of them. How lovely, I referred to the same phrase spoken in that reverie earlier.

But looking closely, they seemed to be exchanging their feelings in an odd manner. They stared at one another in the alley from across, discussing something. Oh... And they split up.

Takimoto this way, while Hoshinaka the other. A fight?

“What’s wrong?”

Aihara squinted at the road. He either didn’t see them, or flat out doesn’t know them. ‘Nothing,’ I said, despite of the complicated feelings building up.

Can’t believe I’d see the source of my headache when I came out for a stroll. Perhaps the world is created by things we least expected it to be. But ignore who it is created by.

Hoshinaka’s silhouette is just about to fade from my sight.

“Hahh...” With a deep sigh I wrapped the scarf back on.

“Sorry, mind if I head out for a bit?”

“Hm? Sure. Can I have your food?”

“Of course not. And I’m not leaving. Be right back!”

I stood up and dashed out of the store. Light’s green, and I crossed the road.

In order to avoid Takimoto, I went out of the way to search for Hoshinaka, who was about to fade into the crowd. I don’t know why either, so it felt empty.

By either turning or raising my arms, I cut between the crowd and fast approached her. As I closed, I wondered how I should address her. So I kept my arm toward her back, temporarily keeping pace with her. I must have looked strange to the bystanders.

“Um... Ahem! Ahem!”

I tried coughing. It looked like an excuse, but it worked. Hoshinaka stopped and turned around.

“Niwacchi...” She called me first, then her eyes grew. A reversed surprise reaction, how unique.

We stopped in the road where people were bumping each other constantly. We did not move — from the meaning alone, it’s the right image.

“What’s the matter?”

That line was as if she’d finally sorted out the questions on her mind.

“I was out for walk when I saw you. Felt like I should at least say hi.”

“Oh?”

She didn’t appear convinced. She probably doesn’t know that it is me who is constantly chasing after her; perhaps finally settled, Hoshinaka walked to the side of the walkway. I followed.

“This must be the first time I’ve seen you on a weekday, Niwacchi.”

“I guess. Where’s the boyfriend?”

I tried to play dumb. Hoshinaka shot a glance at me, seemingly worried with her lips shut. After calming down, she replied casually.

“I was just with him. But he got mad and left.”

“Oh? That’s too bad.”

Unsure what to say, I could only play along.

She exhaled slowly and explained concisely the cause.

“I heard that he punched you, so I told him he shouldn’t have.”

Guess he finally told her. It isn’t exactly something you can say with a grin, though.

It’s probably also not worth bragging about beating me up.

“That’s why you fought?”

“Mm...”

She nodded. Leaning against the building, her gaze appeared tired.

“Is it wrong to say violence is bad?”

“Depends on when and where.”

“Are you fine with being punched, Niwacchi?”

Hell no. Because of how rhetorical the question was, I answered with silence.

She did not press on, instead looking toward the road. With those cold eyes she captured the scenery; I merely stared at her. From those tightly-shut lips she revealed her teeth, as if words would come out. Yet, she swallowed them.

“I have to go. Sorry.”

With that declaration, we are now in a completely reversed position a few days ago in the library.

It’s not like I want a date with her, but hearing her say that, I decided I had to see her off silently. Hoshinaka seemed apologetic, turning her head back many times. But her feet never stopped.

She went further and further away. Visually seeing how she’s disappear in the distance — It’s better this way.

At least when compared to the distance between us which faded without anyone’s knowledge.

Like me now, left to stand there on the sidewalk, but without Aihara waiting for me in the restaurant, and talking to myself.

“Thing’s really crappy recently.”

A nameless something pulled me and Hoshinaka together and fixed us there. Distance is a fine thing: It will never be properly set if you ignore it.

Is that why Hoshinaka asked me out to the park that night?

Yet I couldn’t reach the moon, merely exacerbating the pain of struggle.

“.....”

Ah...

This is it.

I don’t know what this youth is, but any more of this...

Nothing will end, and nothing can begin.

No matter in what form.

No matter how big or small, or if the result will depress me somehow.

I have to put an end to this.

It’s the only way for me to focus on the exam.

The exams are truly terrible. It’s all their fault.

Next week, I studied on Monday.

Tuesday I studied.

Wednesday too.

Thursday omitted.

Friday.

I stopped Hoshinaka after school...

“Let’s go out tonight.”

It’s Christmas.

I don’t recall signing a paper about never leaving at night.

So I accepted going out this time. It's quite an optimistic thought for the me as of late. Clank, clank, the bike emitted a sound like something's missing.

The night of Christmas. On a weekday, there's no such thing as lit-up skyscrapers in the sticks. It might be a little more raucous in downtown, but sadly I was going by the fields. Not a single soul was partying in the farm.

I never see anyone happy after school either. Perhaps in the countryside, it's too early even for people my age to be spending Christmas together. Or maybe it's just the age when one would want to avoid appearing happy for the holiday. You kind of need to be a little hot-blooded to truly enjoy middle school.

White breath trailed behind. As my finger felt my face, I could sense a bit of warmth. I almost feel the bottom of my nose falling off after a few sniffles. I could never get used to this cold.

I checked again to see if she's following. Indeed there's a bike rolling along.

Hoshinaka was behind me. She agreed without a second thought after I had invited her. The conversation followed.

"Let's go out tonight."

"What?"

I told her so just as we're about to pass one another in the after-school hallway. Hoshinaka froze. Naturally it wasn't just me and her in the hallway, what with the students exiting from their classes.

It's was the replay of me and her in the middle of the road that weekend.

"Niwaschi, what did you say?"

She spoke collectedly, but on her face was a serious countenance.

In order to keep my face up, I bluffed by raising my nose.

"Well... I'm inviting you out."

After forcing her to come with me, I then explained that I was inviting her out. That's just laughable. The initial on-the-spot comment weakened me, and embarrassment rushed into my neck like blood.

"Are you asking me out, Niwaschi?"

Hoshinaka pointed at her chin with a finger.

“Yep.”

Her eyes waved as if the surface of water.

“Because it’s Christmas?”

“That’s one of the reasons.”

I knew my face must be red from ear to jaw, so I shut my eyes. Because no matter what, my face will be reflected and seen by my own eyes.

In the limited field of vision, only the voice of Hoshinaka guided my ears.

“Okay. Sure.”

That was it. Now I can’t yell at her for not asking her boyfriend first.

But why should her boyfriend even hear about this? I thought.

Hoshinaka followed me without a word, but she couldn’t hold it in anymore. She spoke.

“Where are we headed?”

“The mountain.”

I answered precisely while keeping ahead. The clanking of the wheel was like voices thrown in.

“The mountain? That’s a little strange, Niwacchi.”

“No~ No~ Yes. Mountain.”

“We’re gonna die if we go hiking in weather like this.”

“It’s fine. We’re not going anywhere high anyway.”

There’s no mountain that high here anyway. At most we got something a little taller than a hill.

And that’s where we were headed on our bikes.

Nothing in particular happens in this town — that’s why we have to be more proactive. I am now about to go live a life that’s not written in the exam preparation books.

I have not been to this hill since I was a grade schooler. And it wasn't because I had business there: I merely passed by it to visit another place.

No lights from cars zoomed by, as though the in-name-only state road had nothing to do with the month of December. Only the headlights of two bicycles carved through the darkness consuming the path. We wordlessly hinted ourselves of our next three months in school.

I remembered a little something: I remember going as fast as I could, trying to break the record of highest speed on a bicycle. I was on a straight road just like this one, peddling on my bike. I crashed in the end.

The wheel broke, and I cried my way home. Just why was I trying so hard?

"Ah... Take a right here."

"Um... Niwacchi? Why are you taking me into the mountain?"

"We're gonna do whatever you want."

"I wish to be eating a bean paste bun at the store."

"Alright, stop whining."

Let's go find that on the mountain.

Though pretty sure convenient stores on the mountains are all homes of bandits or whatever.

With the metal tower with red lights shining as the goal, I turned right. Hoshinaka followed — she must have thought that going back now would be a waste of energy. Thankfully she wasn't complaining all the time.

"You aren't planning on having a Christmas party in a shrine there, are you?"

"Ask your boyfriend tomorrow if that's what you want."

We entered a road with multiple forks. I don't plan on walking through the hiking trails: We are going the entire way on the road. It's 'more like it' this way.

As I am still a third year in middle school, I believe in my way. We rode, on the mountainous path that seemed like it's been cut abruptly into the environment. It had no lanes, and snaked along the ground. It was so small that if a truck carrying stuff were to come from the other side, we'd be flattened. The last

time I was here, we were on a field trip.

“It’d be a little problematic if I don’t make it home tonight.”

“You will. Relax.”

Just running out here tonight is already too much for me. If I stayed out my parents would murder me. Actually, Takimoto would probably do that first.

Shuffling of the grass swaying in the wind came from around. They stood, perfunctorily blocking our way. Their vigour were as if they would devour us if we somehow become entangled.

We made it pass the prairie-like zone and continued upward. Gradually the incline grew, and so did the burdens of the pedals. It was rough, and I bet it must be even more so for Hoshinaka, who didn’t know where we were going. I’ve actually already decided on where to go, just that I haven’t decided where it will be.

That’s why I decided that until one of us said he or she couldn’t do it anymore that we’d keep going. I also kept track of whether we can make it home safely. On that note, we’re pretty much at the limit.

“Alright, almost there.”

I tried a sudden proclamation. Hoshinaka exhaled in relief, ‘finally.’

We entered a path slightly off the paved road. The overgrown snagging onto the wheels almost stopped them, but we made it eventually. After gingerly traversing the woods, we came upon a slightly open area. The wind blew, to which I shut my eye.

It’s a tall, almost cliff-life place. A misstep would fill the night with screams.

I parked my bike; Hoshinaka too stopped hers half a wheel away from mine. She looked toward me.

“This is where you wanted to go?”

She asked, slightly out of breath. While I am too, I moved my slightly-raised jaw downward. The motion blocked my throat for a bit, almost stopping my breathing.

“Oh yeah. Didn’t your boyfriend ask you out today?”

Before the real deal, I started casually. I could hear the grass being stepped on after I put my left foot down.

Man-made noises couldn’t reach here. The only thing clear here is the wind’s howl. And the cold.

“No. We fought, so it wasn’t exactly the mood. He probably won’t call me today, either.”

Hoshinaka answered with what could be attributed as a lonely reply. The wind’s howl that sounded like escaped air came from somewhere, diving above our heads. For a moment, I saw the movement of air on the cables.

“...Well, it doesn’t matter either way.”

After that extended inhale, I breathed out — the real deal.

The stars are far, and I have not the strength to take the moon. With no ways to fly up, there was no chance for me to close our distance.

So I could make as much noise here, as to hope it would spread to the moon. It’s the most I could do.

“I think we should call it good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s let go of what we’re holding onto.”

I lazily pointed at the world that exist above, far, far away.

“Isn’t stargazing the ace of youth?”

Now’s the time.

“Come on, look up.”

“Ah...”

The phone,

The wall,

The coffee can. Without those distractions in the way, Hoshinaka listened

obediently to my words.

In a motion that I thought delicate, she slowly peered up.

Finally satisfied, I too looked upward.

In the dark sky, that which both she and I expected glittered.

“Whoa...”

The sky, as though breathing, decorated itself with clouds. A few stars scattered themselves in and between the white bodies.

Breathtakingly beautiful objects, gathered together and shined with only their distance from the Earth in common.

As if to drill into us how alive the sky truly was, the wind would sometimes nudge us gently.

I asked for her thought without batting an eye.

“Here’s that Youth action you’ve been asking for. What do you think of the way I put it?”

Her reply was a question. That’s a guaranteed zero on the literature exam.

“Niwacchi, were you always so romantic?”

“I’m about three times more than the usual. It is Christmas, after all.”

It’s a bit of a destructive self-assurance.

Because we’re all from the middle of nowhere, I think of it as a bit lame and was embarrassed by it.

“It’s a bit dark tonight. Or, I should say, the night’s thick.”

“Of course.”

Hearing my doubtless answer, Hoshinaka had the exact response I’d predicted.

“Why?”

Here comes the information I didn’t get myself.

“Because it’s a new moon tonight. It’s pretty rare on a Christmas.”

Hoshinaka chuckled a little upon hearing my report.

“A moon-less Christmas... Isn’t that quite an omen?”

“Quiet you. Who cares.”

I rested my torso on the bike’s handlebars, and my chin onto my arms. My right foot rested on the pedal, tapping it like a horse, while my left on the grass.

“Since the moon is gone, who cares.”

After I said so, Hoshinaka, who sat properly on her bike, tilted her head inquisitively. Because of the moon, our distance can never be closed. Naturally, it is all gone today. The stars — they’re why the moon’s gone.

“Is this enough for your so-called, ‘my youth?’”

I intentionally held the answer back, making sure Hoshinaka’s satisfied. She said nothing, however.

“Forget about me already. Stay with your boyfriend, won’t you?”

“You know I can’t just do that, hahah.”

She tried to play it off with a dumb laughter, but I know the topic is not quite ready to end.

But...

Whatever mysterious thing that existed between us should end now.

“You know, when I think about us.”

“Mm...”

“I think it would be great if we could stargaze when we’re much closer.”

I did feel resentful of the truth I spoke. It is the kind of resentment, the useless kind that faded into the mountain.

But before it all left my lung and body, the regret continued.

“Then we would have been in those forty times.”

Before looking back at the stars, I turned to Hoshinaka to see how she was.

Her breath was already back to normal, and she smiled quietly. It was, however, the kind that was frozen in the wind.

“Is it too late?”

She questioned softly. I nodded deeply. My eyes, nose and mouth felt the wind.

“Yes. It’s too late. Not even a sky like this could fix this gap between me and you now.”

A balloon that’s flown out of hand’s reach.

We just now saw that it was still floating today.

And we have to see to it that it’s the last thing we do, and end the act of looking back.

It sucks.

It doesn’t do much.

It is not possible to witness a miracle in the country side.

Because that’s how I carefully experience Youth, in a way suitable for me.

“Let’s end this.”

So that we may get along in the future.

I’m not quite ready to make the trip to moon yet.

“Mm...” She assented lightly. I asked her in a slightly nostalgic tone.

“Do you really agree with what I’m saying?”

“I do. Don’t you feel lonely now, Niwacchi.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t call me on the phone anymore, alright?”

“I know. What about a New year card?”

“That I will gladly take.”

Sometimes I wish for double-digit amount of postcards.

I ignored the spreading glows of Christmas light beneath the mountain.

“Niwacchi.”

“Hm?”

“It’s cool to stargaze, but it’s pretty boring.”

“You just have to say it...”

Can’t you conceal whatever is on your mind with that youth whatever?
Because even I’m feeling it.

It’s like going to watch the sea but end up getting tired of it.

“You’ll never enjoy Youth to the most if you keep this up.”

Strange words escaped her lips.

“So what do you propose?”

“This.”

Hoshinaka’s hand approached. It was not on its way to reach the stars, merely extending horizontally.

The cold fingers lightly touched my hand. I looked at her. Silently moving her bike forward, she rolled up next to me without looking my way, eyes focusing at only the sky.

Perhaps because a little numb, Hoshinaka’s fingers gripped tightly onto mine. The joints rubbed against each other. It hurt, but not a single finger was left to break her grip.

“The moon’s hiding tonight.”

She spoke briefly, as if to erase that usual sense of distance I felt.

Naturally those were words to hide her own embarrassment.

This was the last time me and Hoshinaka were together, trying, bashfully, to warm each other’s hands up.

“What are you, a poet?”

“Oh, shut up. Weren’t you embarrassed too just then?”

“Shut up.” She’s right.

I haven’t held a girl’s hand like this since kindergarten.

I never considered apologising to Takimoto, neither did I feel guilt.

I held hands with Hoshinaka, not for love or friendship, but for farewell.

Through the tips of our fingers, we conveyed what existed in the past, with regrets almost spawning from the touch. With everything ended, we could only share this moment of embarrassment.

But the only way to make up our mind and go forward to the unknown, is to have a steel-like past, so that we may never escape. Hoshinaka and I must move on. No, we *wish* we can move on.

So that one day, we may be able to traverse the moon with someone else.

To put off some of the awkwardness, I spoke to the person on the other side of my fingers.

“How many points would this be? To your Youth Point.”

“Five!”



'This was the last time me and Hoshinaka were together, trying, bashfully, to warm each other's hands up.'

How many points is that out of anyway?

"Niwaschi, which way is to your house?"

"I really don't get what you're saying."

I commented on the words Hoshinaka let out when we're riding on the road.

"Where, pray tell, does gentle Niwaschi-kun reside?"

"Oh~ The next turn on this road."

"Guess we're saying bye here, then."

Hoshinaka braked on her bicycle. The wheels stopped spinning, making a screeching noise. While I didn't have to, out of courtesy I stopped as well.

I looked back at her from slightly ahead. Her smile was a little more uncanny than usual. Her eyes darted, unsure what the grin meant.

"I live the other way."

Without looking, she pointed backward.

"Why didn't you say so from the start?"

"I just needed come, so I can go too."

Her smile finally settled as she said so, like the moon finally revealing herself from the cloud.

"Niwaschi, I don't hate you!"

"Me too!"

"Today was the first I've spent Christmas with someone else! Bye!"

She raised the front end of her bike, and, turning the bike on its rear wheel, began cycling. The melody of wheels spinning in the serene darkness shook every inch of my ear drum more so than the intermittent noise of cars from the road far away.

Pale air leaked from my teeth. It spread, like wings, in the winter breeze. All sorts of pain assaulted my senses as the wind smacked into my dried face and

eyes.

“Me too.”

I said so to the back that drew further away.

My parents will definitely give me an earful when I get home. Will they take all my allowances away?

Just that was enough for me to be regretful of tonight's action.

If more things I approve of appear, it'd be worth it.

Following Hoshinaka's example, I began a steady trip back.

And the dumbass spending his Christmas alone on a bike shouted at the sky.

“I wanna girlfriend, dammit!”

What did my first ever Christmas spent with a non-family member bring? I am not befitted to analyse such a thing. So I'll leave it like that. I should just believe that it gave me the drive to live on.

It'd been a whole year since I spend that Christmas with Hoshinaka. I managed to get into my choice of school, and despite having a phone, I still don't have a girlfriend. I can't blame the tests anymore, so that's a little painful. It's all so laughable, even the me who cursed the tests for everything.

I still run into Hoshinaka sometimes on the way to school. Since she was always with her boyfriend, however, we never stopped and talked when we pass each other by. The moon between Hoshinaka and me, except for that night of new moon, never disappeared. I mean, not much I can do about the sixty times.

It was now the January of me becoming a High School first year. After new year, my parents told me about their job relocation and transferring. I don't know if shocking is the appropriate word for describing this, because whatever knowledge I've acquired for the tests at that time were all gone. I was taken aback, but also overjoyed.

A life of almost-independence was appealing to me. I've never met the aunt I will be spending time with, but since she's the sister of my stoic father, she must be someone of similar calibre. Because she works, she probably won't

bother me too much — it's the perfect environment for me.

And what do I mean by perfect? Youth Points of course. It matters not who came up with it, but I decided to invest my youth onto the increase of said points. Kind of like picking up where Hoshinaka left off, if you will.

What existed between me and Hoshinaka then was Youth. I don't think it was love or friendship: We weren't mature, and we didn't think of others or even each other. We merely stuck our hands out clumsily, like sitting next to one another, yet reaching for the moon high up in the sky.

And, without recognising it, we made fools of each other. Without knowing our distance, we believed that all we had to do was to hold hands. At that age, we were driven by something that could only be created then. So we tried, as hard as we could. This so-called youth isn't referring to being young or having the vigour — it's to be able to fulfill 'the wishes of any given moment.'

From that viewpoint, me and Hoshinaka had our moments of youth — even if it was just the forty times that brushed our shoulders. We may have given up and even took the long way, but we got that special '+4' in our heart. It might have been a 5 point for her, but I don't mind lowering it.

The perfect Youth Score is a five for me, so it's a bit stricter.

So, well, not even the transfer is a big deal.

Because I will be able to delineate my own Youth in the upcoming year and get even more points.

This year has been filled with setbacks, though. The place I'm going will be livelier than here.

"Once I get to the city, uh... I wanna go to the beach with a girl. Maybe we'll jump into the sea together."

I cheerfully packed my stuff on the Sunday before leaving. For once, I was truly happy.

My mind was filled with Youth Points that would be enough for me to reach the moon of my yet-to-exist girlfriend.

Chapter 5 - E.R.O

Q: Select the appropriate words for the following equation:

[] x [] x [] = []

[Niwa Makoto]

[Sudden awakening to carnal desires]

[Trip to the bookstore]

[Running into female classmates]

On a certain blazing summer afternoon.

A certain man on planet earth had a moment.

“My life as a high schooler is rather chaste.”

The half-read novel slipped from the pillow and onto the ground.

Oh... Greetings. Name's Niwa Makoto. A wholesome high school sophomore. Excuse the strange soliloquy. Must be because of that manga Ryuushi-san recommended me. I rolled over after picking up the book. Ahh... The AC feels so nice. This is paradise itself. You cicadas on the outside, you deserve nothing less. Chirr, Chirr...

“A supposed monochrome book looks pink.”

Is this the terminal stage to my sickness? Am I at the point where my aggregated Youth-Points were roasted and consumed? There's no questioning to that. Is my speech less interesting now? I rose, unconsciously scratching my head for comfort.

I closed the book, its corner now slightly bent, without marking the page. Perhaps because of lying for so long, both pain and freedom filled my spine.

The second Tuesday of July. Though the tests were over, the results are

coming back tomorrow. Still, it's a rather relaxing day-off. A desire that rode on this laze seemed to surge from within. I twisted my waist; the sound of popping. "Ah." I yelped. "Ah~ Ah~" The moaning never seized while I cracked my back.

I kept doing so until I was satisfied — or, until that something left me. And for some reason I began hopping. Vertical jumps. Because I couldn't stand the feeling of my feet being planted all the time.

After a few hops, I could feel the inside of my eyes splitting and drifting apart. So I fixated myself onto the ground, hands on the knees, leaning forward to face this demon in me.

The cries of cicadas seemed to remind me; my conscious was present, but its off running in a grassy plain faraway. To the small image in the corner of my eyes, I whispered.

"What I need now is some lewds."

Having someone hear this analysis would be the most humiliating thing. And only for me.

As of recent, or should I say, after I moved here, all of my money was spent on transit. It's something to be glad of, and certainly considered the rudiment of Youth-Points. But that's not the point: A healthy high school sophomore, living such a wholesome life — how's he supposed to maintain sanity?

It's no good as a guy to keep up with the perfunctory rules of 18+ only, and naturally no high schoolers can do just that. Us guys are motivated by such needs — that's why we can burn so brightly. And to do away with the difficult phrases: pornography.

"But not everything in life will go your way, won't it?"

There wasn't a thing in this room that could satisfy my desire. In this room of the Touwa household where nothing is hidden, it could even be said that the tree of youth had withered. A barren land.

I still lament my throwing away of all 'private' items when I moved here — all for the sake of saving faces, of course. There's nothing I'd want more than to go back and beat myself up. I'd even ask him, 'are ya trying ta be a saint before yer get yerself wet? Huh?' I wondered if all I thought about was getting more

Youth-Points and regretted so. “Are ya a dummy, Niwacchi? And ya know how much? Like those kids who make fun of Ryuushi-san’s helmet!”

I scolded myself in imitation of my wonderful classmate, Ryuushi-san. That was actually pretty disgusting. How do girls manage to make such vile sounds?

As I was saying... What was I saying? Right. The importance of the lewds.

Some might claim that I have no need for such things since I already hang out with Ryuushi-san, Maekawa-san and the cousin with whom I live with.

But I can say without a doubt that they are wrong. Or that their youth is far gone.

This is this, and that’s that. As cleaning is different than laundry, even if the purpose is to purify something, the process cannot be any more different. No high schooler can claim to have truly lived youth if it’s entirely wholesome!

“Hold on... Chill.”

I almost shot my leg at the wall with a shout because of my pent-up youth. That would certainly lead to my Kanji certification falling from the wall, as well as danger for my leg.

Almost consumed by my now filth-ridden brain, I looked to the ceiling.

Something like this doesn’t happen without a reason: It was during the exam period when I went to sleep after a serious study session.

First, I dreamt of Erio completely naked underneath the futon, to which I realised I’ve reached my limit. The next day it was of me peeping at Ryuushi-san when she’s changing for club. It’s over. Finally, it was Maekawa-san’s nude cosplay. There’s nothing else to say — that’s not even cosplay any more.

Just yesterday, I saw Meme-san being followed by the words ‘forty years old’ that appeared to have been written professionally in calligraphy. She took off on her bicycle, drawing a storm of dust behind, despite being on concrete. There’s nothing Meme-san can’t do, though I don’t mean that in a flattering way.

I suppose not seeing her naked was my rationality at work.

“That aside.”

I put my hands out in deference. Perhaps because of Meme-san's face, my impulse waned. Could it be that my aunt scares even this violent desire of mine?

"Just like a middle schooler, huh..."

The momentary decline was soon relit. I paced about in the room, coughing as I inhaled the flowing dust. How do I reach my nirvana?

Neither I nor the Touwa Household had the peak of civilisation — a computer — so the easiest route was ruled out. I was also not trained enough to call and ask my guy friends to straight up ask, 'I need something hardcore, now.' I'm left to go out and buy something for the sake of retaining my balance.

I do have a cell phone, but the tiny screen is no good for my fantasy.

"Well, well. Shame I only get motivated for something like this."

While my lips chattered away something like an excuse, I checked the wallet left inside my backpack on the desk. I can probably buy a book.

Eating a vegetarian buffet with Ryuushi-san gave my wallet a good beating. She might have had a good tomato meal, but all I had were apples. But since I had a great time chatting with Ryuushi-san, it's all good.

Dirty mags are readily available and at a bargain price at the local convenient store. But that is not the issue here — In other words, it is too mundane and boring a process from an adolescent's perspective.

Even I am aware of how odd it is to bring about the topic of Youth-point at a time like this, but that's just how I am. One's youth is something that is without flavour unless he is conscious of it; I've come to the realisation, looking at both the people who couldn't enjoy themselves more, and those who were bored out of their mind at the school festival.

Perhaps it's luck: I was the only one home today. Erio did not need me to see her to the Tamura Shop; Meme-san, with a worn-out face from the heat, shambled her way out somewhere.

The time is now to head to the bookstore and come back right away. So, what of spending the afternoon after doing this and that? One has to be especially

considerate especially if his cousin lives in the neighbouring room. I must act while she's gone.

The lazy afternoon suddenly shifted into high gear. While the motive was worthy, I wondered I could simply add a point — if it were three guys, then that's for certain. At times, just a group of friends doing something together weighs far more than the action itself.

“Alright. Let's go find something.”

I spoke calmly and flatly with a stretch — something I didn't even bother doing before the sports festival.

While the genre hadn't been selected, I thought I'll decide when I get there. The one problem was that I must be quick on my feet, lest I lose my spine after a while in the adult section. Such is the nature of going to the nearby school: you might just run into a friend. And tragedy awaits if it were Meme-san. I wouldn't want Maekawa-san to see me either, and if Ryuushi-san saw, she'd gladly bestow upon me in front of everyone the name of 'Shameless-san.' The summer had just begun, yet if that were to happen, my high school junior year would burn to a cinder.

I shut my eyes while enjoying the last breath of cool air after the AC's been turned off.

As though the melting of snow, I let out a sigh once the heat and the cries of cicadas enveloped me.

'The act of buying a porno mag is merely a game to spend my afternoon.' And so I warned myself before grabbing the wallet and the key to my bike lock.

With another exhale, I slowly bent down to gather the strength to sprint.

'That's it!' I commanded my body — Niwa Makoto, for the sake of his youth, dashed out into the summer streets.

While ashamed that my movements were twofold my usual nimbleness, strength swelled.

The July sky was not stingy with its sun, so much so that I was on the verge of shouting a few words along the sound of the bicycle exiting the storage. Still,

the pedalling feet did not cease from full speed.

Any more delay will trigger another form of heat from within. No doubt the pincer attack will melt my skin and bones. While the phrase 'boiling passion' sounds great, it is simply laughable where mine came from.

Despite it being the afternoon, the sun blazed down; my retina felt as though seared just from facing it, and I do not question the severity of my grimace. Even with my vision limited, without cars roaming in the residential districts, movement was not impeded. Sweat drops seemed unable to form as well, until the bike stops. But perhaps they were waiting for that precise moment — a chance to strike.

I proceeded to the train station, and to the bookstore that I frequent. It is possible that it's the longer way from the Touwa household, but it's the only route I know, and it's the one Ryuushi-san taught me. I continued my journey through the station that had more cobweb than people.

While dubious of how helpful my hurrying was, I did not meet any familiar faces on my way to the store. There was the store's yellow rooftop, and under it baskets and baskets of magazines. With its front facing the road, the bookstore doesn't have a parking lot for cars or bicycles. I shoved my bike in the alleyway next to the building.

It was then the accumulating sweat appeared; with the shirt sticking to my skin, disgust came.

Once in a while Ryuushi-san and I visit this store after school. Maekawa-san, too, but only by coincidence. Ryuushi-san recommends me manga, while Maekawa-san novels. The former likes the shounen genre, and the latter sci-fi.

Naturally, I do not pay the nudity section any mind when I'm with either of them.

After locking the bike up, I walked through the store's front door. As the automatic door opens, frigid air breathed by my neck; the remnant of sweat exited at once, and my temperature dropped instantly. This coldness that surpassed pleasure sent my torso into a tremble, and as if sucking the sweat back in, goose bumps swelled.

The spaciousness of this store's interior is unimaginable from the tiny door. Even though the area is only half of that of the underground store at the station, for a country boy like me it is more than big enough. Actually, there was a two-story bookstore where I lived. Problem is, it was the only bookstore.

But that's not important. I must swiftly execute my plan, and even more so when leaving.

Without a moment of doubt I entered, ignoring the weekly magazines and new arrival section, and went straight into the deepest end. The adult section lay there in wait, in the furthest corner. Next to the game strategy section, the wholesome idol photography. With each stride forward I prayed that no one was there... Damn, someone's there. I paused in response.

What appeared to be a couple of high schoolers were messing around in front of the adult section. The two of them squealed, shoving a dirty mag between each other. The hell? Is this part of the stress relief service of the store? Can I stone these two? Such thoughts appeared in my mind.

The idiot couple appeared to be an older girl and a guy my age. I heard fragments of 'Tamago-nee' or 'Kashi.' Wonder if they run a chicken farm. But who cares: They're in my way.

What do I do? I turned to scout the store, but in truth I only looked to a specific place. No one is going to stop this idiot couple. Never mind the girl, the guy is clearly underage. The attendants should say something! I cursed them without any self consciousness.

I wanted to go near the bathroom by the adult section to observe this idiot couple, but instead I ended up killing time at another section to wait for their leave. In truth I had no time, yet something warned me of being rash. Disregarding the possibility that I'm simply a coward I left the strategy section.

This must be the situation in which nothing can sooth the mind. Since I'm also low on money, I had to make the right decision. If a classmate were to see me hunched over at the here, it would be one of the few times that I'm shamed in life. With that in mind, I placed my weight to the right and entered the novel section. A sudden 'Oh? Transfer student?' almost sent me flying.

Because of my screaming, everyone from the customers to the attendants

stared at me in the silent store. Unlike me, who had shrunk into an embarrassed mess, Maekawa-san approached me composedly. She was in a school uniform. One that I've never seen before. On a Sunday.

"What kind of cosplay is this?"

"This is my uniform from middle school. I'm surprised it still fits."

Maekawa-san laughed flatly. I was in no form of sharing the sentiment. With the heartbeat quickened, my eyes drifted and the scenery changed.

Maekawa-san. She's here. I bumped into her when I came to grab a dirty mag. It's a coincidence without any malice. If we didn't run into one another here, we would still be friends who do not know each other deeply. Why are you here? Why?

I suppose not meeting her in front of the adult section was a blessing in disguise.

"You here for a book too, transfer student? Sure got a lot of free time, eh?"

"Oh... Yeah, I'm not doing much..."

Shoot, my voice cracked near the end. I even started getting the hiccups.

"Mm?" Seeing my strange behaviour, Maekawa-san tilted her head with a grin. Dammit, if she started doubting me, I might just end up as 'shameless-san.' So, uh... What do I do?

I pinched my nose in an effort to stop the hiccup; I looked up to Maekawa-san — she's really lanky.

Nothing stood out with Maekawa-san in her middle school uniform. The clothes were just the right length, meaning she's been this tall since middle school. Must have been quite eye catching, like when she falls.

Considering her history of cosplay, it's not too odd an outfit — perhaps even normal. Compared to a sandwich or a manju, it is at least a human getup.

"Why the stare? Don't tell me you have a thing for middle schooler."

Of course not, I shook my head. How long does it take to stop hiccups? Actually now's not the time for that. Running into Maekawa-san had just

formed a difficult obstacle to scale in this scenario.

“Oh~ You’re trying to stop your hiccup?”

Maekawa-san realised my predicament after a look. With the exception to outfits, the well-known clairvoyance of Maekawa-san worked wondrously. She seemed to be waiting for my recovery, shifting her attention back to the novel with her mouth shut. I appreciate how she handles things. And so I continued, trying my darnedest to stop the hiccups. Just holding my breath like so reminded me the stifling innards of a futon roll.

In fact, I’ve done it once. Despite not being tied tightly, it’s quite stuffy; because your breath comes back to you, it gets really warm around the mouth. Truth to be told I didn’t think I was even in the same dimension.

Anyone who can stay in there for an extended amount of time must be a freak. Thankfully no one like that exists.

“Phew... I think it stopped.”

Following my report Maekawa-san lifted her head up; she smilingly whispered ‘Yeah.’ Hm, very cool of her. Still can’t believe this is the same person who’d get her energy sucked out of her the moment she raise her arms up.

Well...

The problem remained.

Some issues had been amended, but I was far from where I was when I just set foot in here. I was still stuck in a rut. What must I do in order to return to that oh-so-great adult section? For some reason, my tear glands felt weak at the thought. Life is tough for a high school junior, more so than a final exam.

“Uh... So, what brought you here, Maekawa-san?”

Hahahahah. The hell am I saying? And the laughter only made it worse. She squinted her eyes; the friendly smile on Maekawa-san’s face faded.

It didn’t help that my eyes were bouncing around to keep watch of the store. Dammit, stop staring. It’s all over if Maekawa-san notices. No doubt she will follow me and jab me with words like ‘Oh~ so that’s your kink, huh.’ A-actually, that sounds nice too... N-no! I must not be fooled.

“Transfer student, are you burnt out from the exam?”

An apparent shock. If that’s what she thinks, sure; but Maekawa-san is quite sharp. It’s possible that she’ll find out from just that suspicion — Nothing ever ends well when she starts asking questions.

“Oh~ Probably. I guess I lost a few points of IQ over the break.”

So I played along to avoid being interrogated. Perhaps never curious to begin with, Maekawa-san noted with a short ‘oh’ before looking away. As though she was observing the store itself, she looked about and rested her chin in her hand.

“Mm... Mm...”

“Uh, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that you’d be hanging with Touwa or Ryuushi.”

“Uh, I’m all alone actually.”

“I see... That’s unusual for a playboy like you.

‘Unfortunate,’ she said. It did not appear, from her grin, however, that she’s at all displeased. Such an envious insult doesn’t fit me, you know. I am, though, around girls often as of recent.

Ryuushi-san aside, Erio is more of a... A fledgling near it its mother.

“Oh yeah. You sound a little twitchy. What’s got you on edge?”

Ugh... She once again prodded without a hint of fear. I choked, almost started hiccupping again. I sounded nervous. Huh, didn’t know that.

“Uh... I don’t... I think.”

I paused, but all it did was make it sound intentional. Annoyingly, sweat poured from my back. And because of that, I wanted to pinch my neck and back. Did they turn down the AC? I looked toward the ceiling.

“And you’re always saying ‘uh.’”

“Uh... Ahaha...”

This must be what a suspect feels during an investigation. A fear of the

ground behind you disappearing: This must be what they call despair.

“You’re hiding something... And not something you are hiding well.”

She looked down with a smile. It was an expression of finding something more interesting than a book. Others probably saw me as a cowardly high school kid getting bullied by a huge woman. But since nobody would give me a helping hand, I remained hopeless.

If it were for something else I’d have given up already, but this wasn’t something that could be so easily settled. Especially since I’m familiar with her. My pride will never allow for this.

Though there are possible repercussions following my trump card, here I go.

“I must be in your way! Take your time!”

“Way to change the topic.”

I simply gave up on talking. It was the only way.

“Hit me up again if you found another novel! Bye!”

“Ah, there he goes... Transfer student, wait~”

I escaped into the manga section without heeding to the enfeebled voice that lagged behind me. I’ll wonder about what to do with her tomorrow later — what’s important is now.

It’s not like the school sells something like a dirty mag, so anything beats getting nothing and still have to deal with her tomorrow. “Eh? Niwacchi~” Crap.

T-this distinctively laid-back voice... I looked up slowly. It had to be Ryuushi-san. Perhaps just finished with her club, she had her backpack slung over a uniform, standing in front of the comic section. Please, stop putting these obstacles in my life.

I coughed from the dust that was driven up by my ceaseless challenges.

“Oh no~ Niwacchi, what’s wrong? A summer flu?”

No one else could sound so relaxed and have such round eyes. There’s Ryuushi-san in the bookstore. Yes: fate had been seized. The certainty known as coincidence was preventing me from getting a lewd mag.

“Oh, uh, I was just so shocked by this funny thing known as fate. I’m a big bag of surprises after all.”

Naturally a point is given whenever one runs into a girl classmate on a day-off, but in such circumstance I felt only bleakness.

“I had no idea, Niwacchi. So if I, Ryuuko, go into a parallel universe and grab another Niwacchi, ya would be real surprised.”

Any one would be.

“Still, what a coincidence. What a wonderful coincidence.”

“Hahahah... Sure.” It had to be predestined.

This stroke of fate smells like Youth-points! I will kick whoever says that.

“What are ya here for, Niwacchi?”

She asked with a smile while showing the cover of the manga she’s holding. Uh, what do I say... I’m here for a book that gets you excited only when you’re alone! Hah! Yeah right.

I tried to buy time with a gross laugh. ‘No... It can’t be...” Ryuushi-san spoke with a dramatic tone and an exaggerated pose.

“Ya are here to buy those nudies books!”

!@#\$. Aghhh, my heart yelped, but thankfully I did not. That would reveal the painful truth.

Ryuushi-san recovered with a refreshed smile.

“Jay~ Kay.”

“J-jay, kay~”

“Oh? Ya don’t look so good, Niwacchi. Yer face’s all mushed up.”

The pain. My chest hurts. The test of courage is fitting for the summer, but I need my heart for the rest of the year, too.

I turned to the sensation of a stare — there was Maekawa-san from behind the shelf. She didn’t budge, possibly from seeing Ryuushi-san; hiding back into the shadow, she disappeared with that meaningful grin.

“Mm?” Ryuushi-san was intrigued by my actions, meaning she did not notice Maekawa-san. It is not my concern what she will do in this circumstance. But what is the circumstance, indeed? Let us analyse. I felt my chest.

Firstly, Ryuushi-san, who’d just finished club activity, is in the manga section. Presently she’s comparing the book prices next to me, all with a scowl on her face. Such a manner in contemplation revealed to me what the phrase ‘Money Niagara Fall’ meant — she must be quite hand-tied.

Maekawa-san, in her middle school uniform, is in the novel section. Oh, there’s her head from behind the shelf. We met eyes; she snickered. ‘So you were totally hanging out with Ryuushi,’ she seemed to radiate. It’s a misunderstanding, of course, but our distance made any explanations impossible.

That aside, with the total of four eyeballs on me, I am basically being monitored by a camera. I shouldn’t expect them to completely ignore a classmate they ran into at a store. Ryuushi-san, especially, was emitting an aura of ‘let’s go home together!’ or ‘Wanna go for some tea at the coffee store?’ Normally I’d thrilled, but now would be disastrous. I comprehended deeply that time and place do matter.

What’s worse was the idiot couple in the adult section. I squinted at the distance to see that they’re still there. The hell are they doing? How much time are they going to waste just standing in a place where you can’t open the books? Idiot couples lost in their world is absolutely a public nuisance.

Fine, I won’t see them as the worst problem. I will just ignore them and find the book I want, and go straight to the counter. That was the plan, but because of other factors it won’t be that easy any more. It was a mistake to have hesitated earlier. I could only grimace at this kind of life lesson with a sigh.

Hurry, think.

Think of a way — A way that would avoid the eyes of both Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san.

If there’s anything of relief, it’d be the fact that the Touwa’s weren’t here. Now those are of a different territory, and far more destructive. Erio would follow me incessantly while yelling ‘cousin,’ while Meme-san would possibly led

me by the hand to the adult section, 'this way, bro!' Thank goodness.

But I must hurry. A premonition told me that those two will eventually join us; as the air chilled me, the feeling came.

"Niwaschi, ya are spacing out. Ya alright? Feelin' sick?"

"Oh!" There's Ryuushi-san staring from up close. Her face was in a spot where I could easily touch her lips, if I were to look down like to greet my paper model club president from middle school. I fretted and backed off a step. Damn my cowardice for backing off. Can I not control my legs?

"Oh... Ya are really jumpy today, Niwaschi."

Ryuushi-san, oblivious to her own careless actions, clapped her hands joyously. Dammit, she's so adorable. Her cuteness and ditz are making this difficult. What do I do? What can I do? Damn, I wish I knew. And so, I complimented Ryuushi-san in the backward and non-sensical way.

"Niwaschi, are ya here to buy some manga too?"

"What? Manga what? Oh, uh... Manga. Yeah, what should I get?"

I actually don't even want to get any: anything extra would prevent me from accomplishing my goal. Naturally I could only refuse Maekawa-san's recommendation, but that won't make things easier.

'So what are you here for?' They'd ask about my actions. Maekawa-san, especially, loves to tease me when I'm vulnerable. As for Ryuushi-san, I can probably just fool her. Seeing how puffy her cheeks are, I grew confident. Ahh, I wanna poke them. Why do girls all look so soft? Is it the glycoprotein? It's the glycoprotein, right? Does it bubble?

"Oh... Uh... Huh?"

"Uh..." My finger already sunk itself inside of Ryuushi-san's face.

I had no recollection of what transpired. Like the Smiling Salesman himself I stuck my index finger into Ryuushi-san's cheek. Uh oh. I tried to endure, but to do something so strange right after letting my guard down, can I even live through this one? Poke, poke. [\[27\]](#)

Ryuushi-san stared blankly. She's spacing out. Uh, what kind of reaction is

this? As I pondered, Ryuushi-san shouted as though immolated. ‘Uwahhh!’ Despite the glares from the others, she bounced about.

“W-w-what are ya doing! Niwacchi, what, uhh, what are ya doing!”

She exploded, flapping her arms like wings; the spot that was poke blushed faintly, but was now no different than the rest of her face.

Her face was beet red.

“R-Ryuushi-san, keep your voice down!”

“It’s Ryuuko! And, uh, uhhh, what are ya doing!”

“W-well, I just thought... Your cheek looked soft...”

“What!? Doncha have something more ta say? D-doncha know what control is?”

Since she’d only being saying ‘what are ya doing,’ I think it’s settled.

“Seriously... Wuu...”

She felt her cheeks while squirming, whispering ‘Ryuuko’s embarrassed’ before covering her entire face. I was flustered as well. Maekawa-san definitely saw this, and the other people must have decided that we’re the most annoying people here. Guess we won’t be coming to this store for a while.

Now I absolutely must get the goods. While Ryuushi-san’s looking down, I stuck my neck out to see the shelf behind her.

Oh, the chicken feeder couples left. With faces the colour of ripe persimmon, they left stuck to one another. The porn that they were shoving to each other earlier was for some reason now in the hand of the girl. As they passed us on the way to the register, I heard a little of what they said.

Basically it sounded like ‘if we don’t buy it, you will come here to buy it anyway, Kashi-kun. Onee-san will go ahead and buy it to make sure that doesn’t happen.’

So Kashi’s his last name. Not that I care. The idiot couple is gone, with no one else in front of the adult section. It’s come — judgement day.

Think. Think!

“.....”

Nothing. There was no strategy to buying the lewd magazine. Being a high schooler is truly suffering. Since it's come to this, I shall trust my instinct. It doesn't matter if it's this or that, just play along with this or that.

Any further activities with Ryuushi-san will incur more embarrassment or a stupid grin on my face, so I turned around and walked away with ridiculous strides.

“N-Niwacchi? Where ya going?”

“Just something.”

I went over to the entrance; after exiting the automatic door, I began moving as if gathering the humid air outside. From the magazines laid inside the baskets by the door, I picked up two book in the pile and returned. As abashed as she was, Ryuushi-san followed; with a rigid smile, I silently moved toward the novel section.

“Hi, Maekawa-san.”

I spoke up to Maekawa-san, who was now kneeling by the novel section. I wasn't, of course, thinking proudly about how I didn't start my sentence with a 'uhh.'

Letting Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san see each other, and then sneaking out to buy a dirty mag. It was no strategy — but a test of luck.

The interaction, however, of these two is never something to be taken lightly of. If there's anything I've learned from the past, this would be it. And so I will see how far this will go.

“Eh? Niwacchi, you came with Maekawa-san?”

Ryuushi-san appeared surprised after knowing the existence of her classmate (are they friends?). Shock turned into displeasure. As for Maekawa-san, her lips hooked upward like the usual.

“What about you? Wasn't there a certain annoying idiot couple around here?”

With a sarcastic and teasing voice, she inquired our being together as

coincidence or intentional.

“I... I’m not an idiot! And we’re not a couple!”

Ryuushi-san flapped her wings about. Hmm... This pose... The time is now. I moved as soon as I see Maekawa-san absorbed in Ryuushi-san’s reaction.

“Uh, I’m going to the toilet.”

I departed as soon as I whispered the words. ‘Oh... Alright’ Maekawa-san nodded lightly. Ryuushi-san couldn’t hear it over the flapping, but at the very least she did not notice me leaving.

The bathroom was located inside the bookstore. And the adult books are in front of the bathroom. What a wonderful arrangement: There is nothing suspicious about me going there. As though motivated by a filled bladder I strode toward the toilets; with every steps, my heart and pulse accelerated.



'Shock turned into displeasure. As for Maekawa-san, her lips hooked upward like the usual.'

I shot a glance toward the store entrance; the rowdy idiot couples were poking each other while exiting. Still staring, I prayed for their misfortune.

With disregard to the adult section I paced into the stalls. After entering, I rested my back on the door. With a thumb measuring my pulse, I waited for my time.

Too short, it'd be suspicious; too long, Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san might begin wandering around after the former calms down. I must time myself to quickly obtain my stuff. It's almost a competition, but with just myself.

While the bathroom was clean, due to the lack of AC inside, sweat began dripping. This heat drowned me like the rising sea, suffocating me. Phew... Haa... I was thirsty, and the dryness drove me nuts. It smelled as though burnt. The moisture in my nose~ This dehydration and my own nervousness made the perfect torture. I shook my head and pushed the door outward.

The numbness crawling up my limbs was just like when I was getting ready for a football game in grade school. This anxiety will eventually corrode my finger, I thought.

It's a feeling that one couldn't help but feel during a test. I had never thought I'd feel the same buying a porn mag, but it's a good sign. It's not the same as not being able to move — it allows for the relaxation of the body. While the fluid in my guts pained me, I could easily manoeuvre in this state.

Experience tells me I work best like this. I suppose a proper amount of pressure and tension serves to lubricate the gears of life.

After the longest thirty seconds in my life, I exhaled the dry air and took a deep breath.

I bit down onto the burnt-tasting air.

It's time to go. I rushed out of the bathroom door.

Two steps, and I reached the middle of the adult section. I pried my eyes open, searching for the right book cover. I had no time for the those in the

shelves: Taking the books in and out will take too much time. Not a single second could be wasted, and I cannot afford to stall. My back was extremely sensitive from not wanting to be seen by them. Each cover had alluring arts, and if possible, I'd rather spend about two hours to find the right one. Unfortunately, I can only settle for a good option instead of the best.

I heard girly laughter from behind. Driven by the sound, I hunched over to pick up a book. 'Alright!' I turned around after checking the cover.

The girl on the cover looked like Ryuushi-san. It's one of the coincidences in all the recent one that didn't matter too much. I totally didn't pick the book because of that.

My ears and sides of the face brightened as I handed the porn to the store clerk. It felt like handing a love letter to an admired senior.

The old lady, whose makeup was coming off, stared at the book on the counter, then me.

I froze from worrying her asking for my age, but she began tapping on the register without a word; I relaxed. She's probably just displeased with Ryuushi-san's yelling earlier.

She coldly stated the price, to which I almost bit my tongue upon replying. I took a thousand yen bill out; the jingles of the register came.

The amount of change could be described as the tears of a sparrow. This book cost me all abilities to visit stores. Well, I guess I could still buy some snacks.

After shoving the book into a bag, the attendant gave me the goods and along the receipt.

I took the bag with shaky hands. As I gripped onto it, the sense of conviction and accomplishment swelled into my hands, my nails even digging into my palm.

Considering that the bag of this store was semi-transparent, I sandwiched the porn between the magazines from earlier. No one would be able to see behind the bold colour of tan.

Despite wanting to bathe in my victory with a fist raised, I left the register

calmly in order to keep low. With one more exhalation, I went to meet up with Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san at the novel section. Hopefully they didn't see me.

"Hey, kept you waiting." That sounded phony.

Even I felt my waving was empty.

"Ah, Niwacchi. Where did ya go? Ryuuko had it rough trying to explain myself."

"Sorry, I was in the restroom. Aren't you two buying something?"

"Huh, you're awfully polite, transfer student."

"Not at all. You should get your books though."

I egged them on to keep things rolling. Their height differed so much, yet Maekawa-san was somehow easier to push. How strange.

"Aww~ What are ya doing?"

Though she wasn't entirely willing, she wasn't putting up much a fight compared to when I poked her cheeks. Perhaps because of the clothes in between, my guilt-ridden heart wasn't filled with hopes.

"Get this, Niwacchi, Maekawa-san was all like..."

"Okay, okay~"

Upon hearing my perfunctory reply, Maekaw-san — not Ryuushi-san — chuckled.

As if she's discovered something... No, that's just not possible.

I was on edge the entire time while waiting for them. I pictured myself taking the plastic bag out and hiding it behind me, but I cringed at just how desperate I was being.

But that's youth for ya. The weight in my hand reminded elated me so. I smirked.

After they were done, we left the store together.

On the way back, Ryuushi-san, with a hand shielding her eyes from the sun,

asked:

“What did ya get, Niwacchi?”

“Hm? A stiff book.”

The cover was stiffer than a comic book's. True story.

Giving my exhaustion to the sun and the singed air, I slowly closed my eyes.

In the darkness, I nonchalantly and lovingly counted my pulses.

“Hm?”

I pondered. In my room. Alone, of course. Sitting on my bed, arms crossed. Like a scientist encountering a difficult issue or a student a test, I moaned while staring down at the dirty mag. My finger tip lifted a page.

My brain and the inside of my eye spun.

I could almost hear its sound inside my perverted mind.

“No! No! No!” I tumbled about. “Ugh...” I seized up with what sounded like a weep. “Argh...” I reached into the air.

“My pink night!” My simple evening seemed to sink like the usual.

Wisdom, bravery and perversion: with these three traits, I returned victoriously from the battle at the bookstore. The only person who knew what I bought should be just the clerk. And so what? I should returned with the triumph of winning at life. That is, until I saw the cover.

“Dammit... I can't get it out of my head... It must be them.”

Yep, there's the porn magazine. Let's pop it open and see those fleshy colours. And then the girl's face. Yet, the eyes and brain that should be enjoying themselves had a mysterious chemical change. I could only see Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san's naked body! I cannot do this! This unpredictable yet meaningless guilt assaulted. Aghhhh... I squirmed with deep sighs. Like a teenage girl I burrowed my face into the pillow and kicked my feet.

“Hmm... This is also youth. Hahah~” Shut up, ya idiot!

I bounced on the bed, my breath now a mess. After failing to get up, I mumbled to myself — rather than to being tranquillised, I was exhausted.

“Damn... It’s too peaceful.”

There I was, troubled by a problem that was hundreds of billions of times smaller than the continuous existence of this planet. Well, I suppose I am one of those billions of people, so relatively speaking, it’s probably a big deal.

Erio’s got her own issues (e.g. the beast of futon roll). Ryuushi-san’s got her own problems (e.g. call me Ryuuko). Maekawa-san’s got her own mysteries (what is her name?). We live day by day, guided by something.

“Is now the best time to be pretentious?”

I moaned. ‘Ugh...’ and stuck my hand toward the dirty mag with more trepidation than with a reference book. Thinking that I’d conquered my fear, I flipped the page open with the tip of my finger.

“Aghh!”



'I could only see Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san's naked body! I cannot do this!'

Perhaps because of the page's background being a blue sky, Erio popped into my mind. This isn't good... Even more so with Erio! She's the beast of futon! That's kinda weak as a reason!

And it's not even a real reason! And it's not why I'm rejecting this book! A man isn't a man if he says no to porn! Alright! I got this! Here I go: I'm going to casually flip through the book, elegantly view it, and enjoy my night—

"I'm home, cousin~" Pitter patter!

A voice as loud as the stomps in the hallway escaped my throat as I jumped. The terrifying realisation of me floating in the air froze a part of my brain.

I couldn't even hide the book because only my time was stopped.

"Cousin?"

As the voice came with Erio's entrance, I finally was able to move my hand to hide the book under my sheets. The cover aside, she saw the entirety of my motion.

"Mm?"

"Welcome home (お帰り)."

I greeted flatly with a pun.^[28]

It escaped me that Erio had returned. I did not hear the door opening or her climbing up the stairs. It's probably because I was too occupied with my troubles.

Tears almost erupted. Could it be that she heard the noises I made earlier? She stared at my pillow with her head cocked. Naturally, it was where I hid the dirty magazine.

"Cousin. You're hiding something."

"No, there's nothing in the sheets."

Shouldn't I be glad that it wasn't Meme-san who saw? It wouldn't take her seconds to see through me. I raise my cup to Erio's naivete.

I was finally able to use the book too. But because my neighbour, who's still technically a female, had returned, not much can be done. In other words, I won't be enjoying it.

She should be more considerate for the high schooler living here.

"Mm... Mm..." She turned her head left and right in attempt to peek under the sheet.

"Hmm..." And I blocked her with my body.

Like a metronome we shook our heads. Erio desperately tried to see my bed, and I guarded it.

"Sunday special: Cousin's secret."

"How about you try to raise your hourly wage instead of doing something so boring?"

Erio moved in. Damn, how contemptible! Not that there's a rule against it. What happens if Erio sees the book? It's confirmed that Meme-san will make fun of me for about a month, but what of this girl? Hmm... Embarrassment? Or curiosity? It's all unknown territory. And one that I don't care for.

"I! Am! Home!"

It's one thing if it were rescue, but the unfitting voice was that of my forty-year-old aunt. It was closer to the shouts of the grade schoolers from across the streets.

"Meme-san is back."

My finger pointed toward the hallway from aside Erio's face.

"Mm." She nodded, yet her approach persisted. Rather than keeping up with this futile defence, I got off the bed. Erio turned about, and I shoved her out.

"Go see your favourite mom."

"The mission of a TV ratings hunter is to discover the cousin's secret."

"Your mom probably has more than I do."

"Twenty years ago~ Twenty years old~ Lala~"

A mysterious song came from outside.

“She’s probably singing along with an air-guitar solo. Go on.”

“Mm...”

Pushed out of the door, Erio looked back with a dissatisfied pout. She coveted the hiding place of the pornography. Seriously! Just stick with your futon!

“If we live till four hundred~ Then forty is like eight~”

Lala? Her singing sounded worse than that of the drunk old men at a Karaoke competition. A little more sentimental, I suppose.

I nudged Erio out of my room. Either bored or desisted, she looked back at not the bed, but me.

“Please look forward to next week’s Sunday Special.”

“It’s not a special any more if its weekly.”

With that final nudge on her back, I sent Erio down the stairs. Phew...

I stayed to make sure she didn’t fake me out before gunning back into the room. If Erio went back to her room next door, I won’t be able to use the book well — I must do what I must do now.

While that was my thought...

“She... That forty-year-old might appear in my fantasy...”

Perhaps because of her shouting, I sense Meme-san’s presence growing ever stronger. It will be a lost cause if she appears. My rational defence will collapse, and I will forever be traumatised. Why must I be horrified during my times of pleasure seeking?

In the end, I lamented at how crappy of a day off this was. The book remained unused in my possession.

And I now must live an apprehensive life like just now with my neighbour.

The thing in my hand only served to shackle me.

“Sigh...”

I’d given up on counting my points.

“In the end...”

I probably won't be having a good dream.

With the prayer that I won't see Meme-san, I shut the lights off.

Good night, and good bye. I'll face this tiny problem tomorrow.

Afterword

My favourite short-manga series as of recent would be Dead Man's Q.

As for myself, it'd be my often dreaming and my father visiting my house, asking, 'any fan mails for me?'

Something like a novel, the third instalment:

I must hurry, I say so to myself on the way dashing out of the store's back door. I have a few stores to run to today, so speed is of the essence. Usually one would have to rely on the tools of civilisation like the mass transport or a vehicle, but it was an inopportune time.

My personal bicycle was, perhaps by some brats who snuck out during the night, in a disarray – the front tire was punctured. In the end, I had to walk my way to a restaurant downtown.

I get that people who don't finish their manuscript before the deadline are awful, but I admit that going to pick up the manuscript on the last day isn't any better. In that spirit, I never once expressed displeasure when I went to retrieve it.

As my breath became shallower, I noticed my chin raised while my feet dash in the middle of downtown. People look as though they are mannequins when I realised how comedic my arm-swinging was.

I seem to be the only one trying to survive here, and it isn't pretty. If it were five or six years ago, the university me would have laughed at the me now. But that's how it is: procrastination can only be cleaned up like so.

It's possibly the best phrase to describe life. If only I tried a little harder during uni, then I would have...

“You're using time wrong!”

“Whoa!” A female's face pops into view.

Because of her abrupt appearance, I cannot brake in time. The female's forehead knocked into mine. The sound of bones contacting one another condensed into a deep thud. A momentary darkness with the impact. As though ripped open, my eyelids snapped; along with the laboured breathing, colour and shape returned to my sight.

“Damn... That hurt... Ugh...”

Like being poisoned, the site radiated with pang. Numberless needles pierced the deepest end of my bones; the pain did not spread, and it screamed without ever leaving. I worry that my skull is cracked.

After seeing to myself, I went to the woman who suddenly popped out. As if she has been practising, the woman stood there with a smile with disregard to her reddened forehead. It's the same woman who came out from the road. How she manages to phase in and out unsettled me.

“Let's talk about happiness.”

“What?”

“We can discuss about happiness, or I can read your palm. I wanted to make you stop and change how you live.”

With a grin, she stretches her arms out to block my way, undeterred by the possibility of getting in people's way. The words that fell from her mouth sounded as if her brain was screwed on backward.

I froze; sweat dripped from my confused scowl.

She beamed continuously.

Was she born with a brain defect? A missionary? Probably both, since it's so hard to differentiate the two. Though from the way she spouted happiness, she's probably the latter. With that bright smile, however, it was quite terrifying.

The female has slightly long hair, and her skin a bit tanned; she dyed her hair brown to match her complexion. A young appearance, and on the cute side too. Everything she wore is the Sh*mamura brand, like a certain housewife-editor of

a magazine. The clothes on her were light, fitting of summer. On her neck was a talisman in the shape of ivy.

“Sorry, I'm in a hurry.”

“That's where you're wrong. You have to be in a hurry — with purpose.”

“I am seriously in a hurry.”

I try to walk around her, but she catches my arm. The female's temperature and the early summer latches onto me, but somehow all I feel is a chill. Don't tell me her passion is stolen from other people's temperature?

“All I'm saying is you're hurrying in the wrong way. Please listen.”

Even as I try to get her grip off, the only thing happening was her arms shaking up and down.

“What's so wrong?” Your head is wrong. I thought. As I quit moving, the mannequins surrounding us began their motion. I turn for some help, but nobody looks this way.

The female is the only one looking with spirited eyes. Like the faces on those people in the station who really wanted to read my palm.

“Something big is happening soon. The Master said so.”

“Mas... Master? Really now...” Damn, it's one of those. She's going to mess me up.

“The time is upon us, but people are wrong with how they hurry. In order to assist the Master and his salvation, we pray on the roads like this to keep the mass from leaving astray.”

If you're praying, do you really have to grab my arm? Are you from the cult of pliers?

I'm a little pissed from how brusque their salvation is. If you're planning to save me, help me get my manuscript.

“You just said something is happening, but what, specifically? And what will you do then? What do you want me to do? You've never thought about it, just following every word your boss says.”

“If you're interested, you must come to Master's speech!”

Despite my heated response befitting of this summer, she simply talks over me. She tugs at my arm. I cannot stand bluntness; I thought of begrudgingly telling her to not do that till it's winter.

I focus on how to break free of her grip. Safely, and without her further meddles. The wrist that is held by what cannot possibly be human strength began to bruise.

“The power of the individual may be weak, but as long as we work together to spread the words of the master around, we might just avoid the event. Let me ask: what could you possibly change by hurrying in the wrong way before you ran into me?”

With the rapid firing of words of spit, she ascribes to me the triviality of humanity.

Her last words hit me. Naturally, as a small-time magazine editor, someone would take my place even if I was never born.

It won't be the same without me. How often does one encounter something like that?

But you're no different. Even your master is the same.

You cannot differentiate the pawns on a chess board. The realisation of that is why, even if you lament many things, you try the hardest despite it being the smallest things.

An anger grows within me, and anxiety appears. If I try to seriously convince her with logics, I might just get dragged into a dark place unknowingly to see her so-called Master's light.

I begin my stride forward. The female latched onto my arm moves as well. Seeing that, I nodded, and began moving toward the road. 'Eh?' I drag the surprised female and stand in the middle of the road.

Naturally, it's the road that cars run on.

“What are you doing!?”

And I'll send those words right back.

The female let go as a car approached, running raggedly to the sidewalk. I do not celebrate my new freedom, instead following her frantically. The vehicle honked. Sorry.

Fear and surprise spread her eyes wide as the female returned to the sidewalk; laboured breathing from the scare has her shoulders rising up and down.

Her bit of sanity moves me just a little.

It's the first time, as odd as it is, that I've smiled after meeting the female. And so I run by the female's side.

“Do you really not care!? You'll regret it when the time comes!”

“Shut it! Who doesn't have regrets!”

I leave the female with those words. She's the one who needs to change the way she hurries in life. That's why she will forever get rejected and regret over it.

However, living a hurried life when you're still young and energetic might just be a way of life.

In any case I'm running late — gotta hurry.

“Um... Where do I go?”

The memories are blurry after that bump, so I have to check to be sure. I rest onto the wall after making the corner, whispering my schedule.

Thanks to that woman, I have to stop and waste my time like this.

How irritating.

From now on, no matter how difficult or meaningless the path I walk, I will only think of this when I remember this cultist woman taking up my time:

“I pray that wasn't the most meaningless time I spent today.”

Same goes to that woman earlier. Clap, I end my prayer.

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Tsuchinoko is a creature in Japanese lore
2. ↑ This is a phrase supposedly used by George van Tassel, a famous alien contactee, to summon the UFO
3. ↑ Likely a reference to Shishimaru of Ninja Hattori-kun, the pet dog who likes Chikuwa
4. ↑ This is a reference to the Japanese TV show Hey!! Say! A Board of Education. It can be likened to America's 'Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?', or anything similar quiz shows with questions pertaining to common knowledge taught in mandatory education
5. ↑ Meat and potato stew
6. ↑ The 'you' here seem to indicate the child
7. ↑ In imperial, that equates to about 5ft7. Needless to say, tall for Japanese girls
8. ↑ 180cm equates to 5ft 11in. Jingu Bang refers to the weapon of the Sun Wukong, known for its ability to grow as big or small as its owner desired
9. ↑ Anpan is a bread filled with red bean paste
10. ↑ 家具屋 is spelt the same way as Kaguya
11. ↑ the cowry shell born of a swallow was one of the objects Kaguya Hime demanded of one of her suitors)
12. ↑ Korosuke from Kiteretsu Daihyakka. A robot assistant to the main character Kite Eiichi. His favourite food is croquette
13. ↑ Chinese Zodiac has 12 animals, one for each year, whereas Western a sign each month. Meme-san is referring to the former
14. ↑ known as Shogayaki
15. ↑ This is a possible reference to a Tokiwa Erika, who managed to reduce her weight from 190kg – 400lb – all the way to 55 (120~) or so. I don't think it's a nickname given to Maekawa, as she should be the same

age as Erio

16. ↑ Think of it as alphabetic order but with kana
17. ↑ Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift
18. ↑ 四二 sounds like 死に, or to die
19. ↑ 地藏菩薩, Jizouposatsu. In Sanskrit Kshitigarbha. A deity widely revered in East Asian Buddhism
20. ↑ A day celebrated in several Asian countries meant to promote sports and an active lifestyle
21. ↑ While I don't have the original Japanese text, it's safe to assume that Makoto here used Boku 僕, which he promptly corrected himself to Ore 俺. The difference between these two pronouns is that Ore is the more masculine choice, often used between close friends and family
22. ↑ Hoshinaka's first name is written as 小海 ko-umi. The meaning is literally 'small sea.'
23. ↑ Paper folding. Usually papers are folded into shapes of objects or animals. Paper model on the other hand is much more detailed and is cut from paper then folded
24. ↑ A reference to a character from the Usotsuki Maa-kun and Kowareta Maa-chan 嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん series. Tachibana Eiji 橘エイジ, real name Kikkawa Eiji 橘川英次, is an author and a cat lover
25. ↑ Japanese Kanji Aptitude test. The level ranks from 10 to 1, with number 1 being the most difficult
26. ↑ This is referring to the first of the ぼくらbokura series ぼくらの七日間戦争 Bokura no Nanoka-kan Sensou, Which roughly translates to 'Our Seven Days War.' Characters Kikuchi Eiji and Aihara Toru are classmates from class 1-A. In the first work, a group of students of a certain middle school have declared war on the adults, and consequently have taken refuge in a local abandoned factory. Kikuchi Eiji appears to be the leader, while Aihara Toru is in soccer club like he is. Unfortunately there is no English information I could gather as of yet.
27. ↑ In reference to Warau Salesman's signature grin
28. ↑ お帰り or お返り could mean either welcome back or go back